*Author:*
**King, Peter Charles**

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**The context of spirituality : a study with special reference to Thomas Merton & Dietrich Bonhoeffer.**

# THE CONTEXT
# OF
# SPIRITUALITY

A Study
With Special Reference To
Thomas Merton & Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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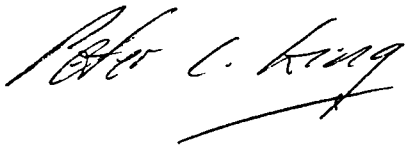
**Peter Charles King, M.Theol**

*A thesis submitted to the University Of Bristol*
*in accordance with the requirements for the degree*
*of Master of Letters*
*in the Department of Theology & Religious Studies.*

December 1992

I declare that all the work contained in this thesis is the result of my own research.



**Peter C. King** **December 1992**

## Dedication

This study is dedicated to Valerie, Nicholas & Felicity
and to my parents.

## Acknowledgements

There are many to whom I owe thanks upon the completion
of this study.
It is my hope that those who are not named below will
nevertheless recognise themselves in these acknowledgements.

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whilst preparing for the ministry of the Church.

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our son Nicholas and our daughter Felicity,
have given me time and space
at home, much of which was rightfully theirs.

## ABSTRACT

This study sets out to explore the "spirituality", its "context", and the interaction of the two in the lives of two twentieth century Christians: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Thomas Merton.

As such, the intention of the study is not exhausted by a discussion of the life and thought of these two figures from recent history. For the issues are far wider than such a restriction would allow. Nevertheless, the life and thought of Bonhoeffer and Merton is of considerable importance to the whole work, not least because both embody what amounts to a new integration of "spirituality" and "context". Indeed, one of the central characteristics of them both is a concern for integration - a movement from dualism to unity.

Therefore, the overall intention of the study is twofold.

Firstly, to explore this rather nebulous concept of "spirituality", and to suggest a framework of reference within which to discuss it and, finally, to venture a definition - namely that 'spirituality is about the stuff of life as it is experienced, internalised, and responded to by a spiritual person - ie. one who has received the grace to see within that stuff the creator God'.

Secondly, to explore the life and thought of two figures important to Christian thought and action in this twentieth century, and, in the course of that exploration, to come to a greater understanding of how the integration of life and faith worked out in practice in the lives of two people with very different backgrounds, temperaments, and theological / ecclesial allegiances.

To this end, the main body of the study considers both figures in turn, focusing first on their life and then on their thought (either chronologically as in Bonhoeffer's case, or thematically as in Merton's). This structural feature is no accident, but is intended to underline the concern of the study for the integration of biography and thought, life and faith. Preparatory to this, an Introduction seeks to mark the perameters of our exploration through a consideration of the terms which make up the title of this work. Finally, a Conclusion suggests areas of common ground which have emerged from the two central chapters, before passing on to consider the extent to which Bonhoeffer and Merton may be said to embody what is becoming widely known as the "New Paradigm", particularly as it is articulated in a number of recent studies.

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# *Introduction*

> I have to say that I am very leery of the contemporary interest in "spirituality". I consider that a buzz-word which has no very precise or commonly understood definition. And I think it is valued for the reason that it can be taken as something positive and good - yet with each speaker being free to define for himself what spirituality's good might be. The term itself is completely undisciplined and thus cannot serve disciplined thinking. ... It is to my mind the cheapest of all cheap graces.

Here, in the words of a correspondent commenting on the theme of this study, is summed up the present "problem" of spirituality. It is not at all clear whether we know what we are talking about when we use the word. Or, if we do, it is by no means certain whether we could agree with others on a definition. And so, it would appear, there is reason to be hesistant about the use of the term "spirituality". Yet I do not believe that we must therefore abandon the word altogether. Indeed, it is hoped that this study will demonstrate that the term can in fact serve disciplined thinking and, furthermore, that it can speak of "costly grace" (as embodied in the lives of Bonhoeffer and Merton, for example) just as readily as it can the "cheap grace" of which it is accused. With this in mind, the task of this Introduction is to map out the perameters of this study, mindful of the need to locate "spirituality" within a framework of reference to the context - of both faith and life - within which, I would suggest, it finds its meaning.

## 1. 'Spirituality'

### What is Spirituality ?

Despite the widespread use of the word 'spirituality' in current literature, there is, however, no one agreed definition of the word. Parker J. Palmer, the Quaker writer, speaks of the spiritual life as

> the life of the spirit within us. [1]

Joan Timmerman writes of spirituality as

> a response to the transcendent God, not as external, but God experienced as immanence. [2]

The Roman Catholic theologian Thomas F. O'Meara writes that he considers spirituality to be

> theology which has been personalised. [3]

O'Meara is concerned to speak of Christian denominations as 'Schools of Spirituality', and so a 'spirituality' is a term which describes a Christian tradition such as the Quakers, or the Lutherans, or the Orthodox. Thus O'Meara can claim that

> A spirituality is a way of life and a way of seeing life; it is a tradition, a vision realised in praxis. A spirituality colors and reveals life. [4]

Furthermore,

> Since spirituality is a Christian world - view, a school of spirtuality...is [not] a segment of a wider theology...[but] is the whole...seen through certain concrete perspectives. [5]

Of the formation of a spirituality, O'Meara writes

> Life's and love's preferences lead one to select, to arrange, to emphasise a coherent gathering of teachings and images. This cluster, very much one's own, is the spirituality. What appears on the surface as an arrangement of gospel truths and powers into a personalised pattern has at a deeper level been stimulated by a particular time.
>
> History and psyche create a spirituality...whether in the *zeitgeist* or in the individual, a spirituality appears in a moment of history to present a vision or a path to grace. A spirituality comes into existence...to apply dynamically those facets of revelation which appear powerful and usable for this world or this psyche. [6]

O'Meara is aware of the inherent tension between the one Christian spirituality and distinct spiritualities. This tension is marked by the necessity both for a spirituality to be Christian, and thus identifiable with Christian spirituality, and for it to be a spirituality, and thus identifiably mine or yours. However, there are resources within the history of Christian thought which are of assistance in exploring this tension. Jay Rochelle cites the Scholastic distinction between *fides quae creditur* [the faith which is believed - in the sense of an objective given] and *fides qua creditur* [the faith by which one believes - in the sense of a subjective appropriation and expression]. [7] This distinction can be applied equally validly to spirituality as O'Meara has defined it. Thus there is the whole stream of Christian spirituality on the one hand and the spirituality of the individual or the group on the other hand. It is noteworthy that both Bonhoeffer and Merton experienced a shift in their life and thought from what could be described as *fides quae*

*creditur* to *fides qua creditur*. This will be considered, particularly in relation to faith stage theory, in the Biographical chapters below.

In a further article, Rochelle explores the relationship between theology and spirituality. He cites Von Hügel's distinction between *Theoria* and *Theologia*. The first is the vision itself (the spirituality), the second the words with which that vision is described and communicated (theology). Von Hügel's third element, *Cultus* (worship) is described as

> the arrangement of contingencies so that the vision may recur. [8]

This definition could, without too much reinterpretation, be applied to Ethics. For it is Ethics which seeks to make the vision recur - but as a reality in the world.

The distinction between *Theoria* and *Theologia* is also of importance in our discussion of Bonhoeffer and Merton. For they both share a vision which has much in common, yet their formal theological positions are very different: Lutheran Protestant on the one hand, and Roman Catholic on the other. This in its turn raises the question as to the implications of their shared vision. David Abalos, in a recent article, suggests three possible understandings of God's activity in the world. Firstly, that God endorses the world as it is at present ordered (The God of Emanation). Secondly, that God enables us to live with the world as it is (The God of Incoherence).

Thirdly, that God creates alternatives that present new and better possibilities for all of human life (The God of Transformation). Therefore, Abalos can claim that

> a Catholic who journeys with the god of transformation has more in common with Hindus, Baptists, or Anglicans who travel with the same god than with a Catholic who is committed to the god of emanation. [9]

This claim concerning a Christian vision shared across the boundaries of tradition and denomination will be considered in the conclusion to this study, after detailed discussion of our two subjects, and in the light of other recent work. In a recent volume of papers on what is sometimes referred to as theology's "new paradigm", Hans Küng asks a question which - with little amendment - this study seeks to address in relation to Bonhoeffer and Merton, namely:

> What ... are the conditions ... common to us all - which make it possible to do theology today, the conditions which, beneath the surface of all the deviating theologies, hold together post-Enlightenment theology in the *oikoumene* ? [10]

It is the intention of this study to inform our understanding of the concept of spirituality. The question with which we opened this section - What is Spirituality ? - can clearly be answered in a number of ways. However, at the outset, the following is suggested as an attempt to locate our discussion of spirituality in its wider theological context. Thus it is the assertion of this study that

> Being is to Spirituality, as Believing is to Theology, and Doing is to Ethics.

The life and work of two twentieth century figures will be examined, mindful of the relationship between these three elements: Being, Believing, and Doing. For each of the two subjects, the central theme of their Spirituality will be isolated and discussed. And it is these central themes which, for each, characterises their own particular account of 'Being'.

For Bonhoeffer, to **be** was to be a **Disciple**. At least from *The Cost of Discipleship* onward, Bonhoeffer's life and writing is concerned with following Jesus Christ. Although the implications of this vocation were to vary during the course of the ensuing years, it was to remain at the centre of Bonhoeffer's life. Therefore, it is the young pastor's concern to follow Christ that leads him in to the midst of the horrific world of Nazism, and of anti-Nazi intrigue and conspiracy. Discipleship, therefore, is clearly the major theme of Bonhoeffer's spirituality.

For Merton, to **be** was to be a **Contemplative**. His life is marked by his monastic vocation, and Contemplation is his overarching concern at least from the time of his entry into Gesthemani. Furthermore, it is as a Contemplative that he enters into the areas of social concern and interreligious dialogue that were to occupy him through the later years of his life. Any discussion of Merton's spirituality, therefore, has to be rooted in his vocation to be a Contemplative.

Each saw their central theme as defining not just the [supposed] "spiritual sphere" but in fact their whole approach to life, and indeed their life itself. Furthermore, to use words of Jay Rochelle, each theme served also in the task of

> communicating to others a framework within which to think through life issues. [11]

**Spirituality and Theology**

As will be seen from the discussion at the conclusion of this study, there is an increasing awareness that theology is always done in context, and therefore, that the context is of some importance for a true understanding of the theology under discussion. This means that the lives of those who do theology can be relevant to an understanding of their work. That this is the case with the subjects of this study will be clear from our discussion of their lives and thought.

Furthermore, James McClendon has suggested that biography can in fact be understood as theology. Thus he writes of those who embody

> the convictions of the community, but in a new way; who share the vision of the community, but with new scope or power; who exhibit the style of the community, but with significant differences. [12]

Such lives expand or correct the community's 'moral vision' or spur on efforts to fulfill a pre-existing vision. Therefore, such lives are, in themselves, doing theology.

The relationship between spirituality and theology will, therefore, enter our discussion again. This study will be concerned with theology but also with the lives of those who are doing the theology. The concept of spirituality is one way into an investigation of this interrelationship.

**Spirituality and Ethics**

The relationship between spirituality and ethics is also of importance to this study. In this connection it is of interest to note the present movement from a **Decision** to a **Character** basis for Christian Ethics. Stanley Hauerwas [13] and James McClendon [14] are representative of those theologians concerned to root ethics in character, and thus (it would seem) more readily to relate Being and Doing. Thus McClendon quotes approvingly from a correspondent:

> Only if we understand who we are and what sort of history we are involved in will we be able to make wise decisions and know which of the more general ethical principles apply to us and why. [15]

Our study of Bonhoeffer and Merton will investigate the relationship between their spirituality and their ethics, recognising that both character and ethics take form as what McClendon

terms 'embodied selfhood'. We will therefore note the extent to which the ethics of our two subjects arises out of who they are (their being) and how much it arises out of what they believe (principles - thus calling for decision).

## 2. 'Context'

### Personal History

The most immediate element in the Context of Spirituality is the individual's personal history.

It is, therefore, of some importance to consider the spiritual development of Bonhoeffer and Merton. For this purpose the work of James W. Fowler offers a series of stages by which a person's spiritual development can be recongised and identified. It is appropriate briefly to summarise Fowler's work here.

In his work, Fowler actually identifies six stages of faith, from what he terms the Intuitive - Projective stage of pre-school and infants to the 'exceedingly rare' stage of Universalising faith. [16] Of interest to this study, however, are the three stages which Fowler terms Synthetic - Conventional ['Conventional' in this study]; Individuative - Reflective ['Individuative']; and Paradoxical - Consolidative.

Of the characteristics of a Conventional faith, Fowler writes that

> while beliefs and values are deeply felt ... there has not been occasion to step reflectively outside them to examine them explicitly or systematically. [17]

This is the faith found in adolescents and many adults. It is a conformist faith, where authority is sought in traditional sources. Here is the *fides quae creditur* - the faith which is believed - sincerely but uncritically.

There often comes a time when these traditional sources of authority initiate changes in previously accepted teachings and practices. Vatican 2 is an obvious example. Such changes, or situations of contradiction between opposing sources of authority, where unanimity is broken, may lead to a shift to an Individuative faith. Here the faith which is believed is in process towards the *fides qua creditur* - the faith by which one believes. Authority and tradition are subject to critical reflection, and the focus shifts from the objective given to the person of the recipient. This is the faith of young adulthood, or even later. Many do not reach it at all. This stage is characterised by a new awareness of one's personal responsibility for one's own beliefs and commitments. Furthermore, the process is marked by tensions - between the individual and the group as source of identity, between self fulfilment and service, between absolutism and relativity.

However, the Individuative stage is inclined to over - simplification. The Bonhoeffer of *The Cost of Discipleship* is an eaxample. And a recognition of the complexity of life (as did occur in Bonhoeffer as he came face to face with the necessity of opposition to Hitler and the unexpected alliances that might lead to) may lead to a further shift to a Paradoxical - Consolidative faith. Whereas the

relationship between the two previous stages is rather like that of thesis and antithesis, this stage brings the synthesis. For much that was 'suppressed or evaded' in the previous stage now becomes reintegrated. This explains the often cited "second naivete", whereby myths and stories previously demythologised, now gain new power. In Fowler's words, there is a

> new reclaiming of one's past ... [an] opening to the voices of one's deeper self. [18]

Here a concern for setting boundaries and defining identity gives way to a concern for integration and inclusiveness. Thus, as Fowler writes:

> What the previous stage struggled to clarify, in terms of the boundaries of self and outlook, this stage now makes porous and permeable. ... Alive to paradox and the truth in apparent contradictions, this stage strives to unify opposites in mind and experience ... [and is] ready for closeness to that which is different and threatening to self and outlook ... [19]

This stage is unusual before mid life, and many also do not reach it. It is consolidative in the sense that it builds upon the foundation of the previous stage, yet it is paradoxical too because of its openness and inclusiveness.

Fowler's work is used in this study in order to aid our understanding and appreciation of the spiritual development of our two subjects. We are fortunate in that work has been done on both Bonhoeffer and Merton with reference to Fowler's stages, and these sources are referred to where appropriate. However, it is important

to note that Fowler's stages are essentially a framework which can be used in order to aid our own understanding of our subjects. We cannot read his stages back into their own self understanding. And so, in our use of faith stage theory in this study we are already offering our own commentary and interpretation of the biographical information before us.

However, faith stages are not the only factors of interest in an individual's personal history. There are important influences on spirituality traceable back to the individual's childhood and home environment. This is noticeable in both Bonhoeffer and Merton. The death of the oldest Bonhoeffer child in the First World War, and Merton's rootless childhood, are not insignificant to their later spiritual formation.

Furthermore, events in one's personal history - such as Bonhoeffer's decision to join the conspiracy against Hitler or Merton's appointment as Novice Master - can exercise a considerable influence upon one's spirituality. In both these cases, however, the movement is two way, and this illustrates the close connection between faith and life which is so notable of our two subjects.

If a spirituality is very much one's own, then biographical details are of considerable importance in any assessment of an individual's spirituality. Yet the history of the world in which the individual lives is also important as the second element in the Context of Spirituality.

**Social - Political Situation**

Both subjects of this study lived at a time of crisis, and each sought to live out a Christian response to the crisis facing them. Although separated by time and space, both Nazi Germany and mid twentieth century America shared certain characteristics in common, as Merton himself often observed. [20] Yet both men are utterly concrete and specific in their reflection and action, only too well aware that

> there come times when the situation is so grave, so fraught with radical consequences, that fence-sitting is no longer possible. [21]

Bonhoeffer, of course, was faced with the Crisis of Nazism. Germany had changed profoundly under Nazism, and the injustices of the regime were such that a renewed affirmation of the faith of the Church was seen by some to be necessary. The Barmen Declaration, and the formation of the Confessing Church, both stand as responses on the part of some German Christians to the crisis of Nazism. The life and work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer stands as a Christian response to the world of Nazism, and as such is in part a product of Nazism.

Although he was not faced with social-political crisis as personally or immediately as Bonhoeffer, Merton in his later life was deeply aware of the state of the world in which he lived, and of his responsibilities towards that world. Racism, the Bomb, Vietnam,

characterised the world of the 1960s, and generated the ethos of protest in which the American Church found itself - sometimes unwillingly - involved. The life and work of Thomas Merton stands as a Christian response to that world, and as such is in part a product of it.

Of course, Bonhoeffer and Merton cannot be exclusively defined by their response to the crises of their times. Their contribution to life, spirituality, theology and ethics far surpasses their immediate situation. And yet it is important to note the social - political arena in which their mature spirituality was formed. For both faced a crisis with urgent theological implications, and both responded to it as a Christian. Therefore it is suggested that both are in part formed by the social - political situation which they faced. Would Bonhoeffer have written the *Ethics*, or written of 'religionless Christianity' were it not for the Nazi regime ? Would Merton have emerged as such an acute cultural and and social - political critic were it not for the Bomb culture of his time ?

For Bonhoeffer, Discipleship gains new meaning as Christ leads him into the midst of the moral relativism of Nazism. In a similar way, for Merton, Contemplation and all it implies about reality, leads to a perceptive critique when it turns to face the foundational illusions of 1960s America.

The wider context within which each individual lived is clearly seen from the Biographical sections of this study. Yet,

the individual and his personal life stands in the foreground. Therefore, reference here to the importance of the wider context to the lives of the subjects of this study, is an important preface to what is to follow.

**Theology**

It is clear that each of the subjects of this study stands as part of a distinct Christian tradition, and as such represents a distinctive strand of Christian theology.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer stands clearly within the Lutheran Protestant tradition. Indeed, Bonhoeffer may be said to take Luther's theology to its logical conclusions in his spirituality of Discipleship. Yet Bonhoeffer also has much in common, at the level of spirituality, with the Catholicism of Merton.

Thomas Merton, by contrast, stands clearly within the Catholic Contemplative tradition (actually a tradition within a tradition), and as our discussion of Merton's theology indicates, his theology and his spirituality are remarkably consistent. Yet there is also much that he would share with his protestant colleague.

If 'a spirituality' is indeed the application of

> those facets of revelation which appear powerful and usable for this world or this psyche [22]

then there are reasons **why** both Bonhoeffer and Merton remained part of their respective traditions, despite all that drew them beyond the boundaries of their chosen theological community.

Bonhoeffer remained a Lutheran Protestant throughout his life. It was not by choice, but by upbringing, that he was a Lutheran, yet there were resources in that tradition which continued to satisfy him throughout his life. During the 1930s, the Lutheran Pietist tradition represents most clearly the young pastor's position. Then, during the 1940s, it is Luther's Theology of the Cross (clearly present in the background throughout Bonhoeffer's work) which comes to the fore. And such was the ethos of German Lutheranism that it is difficult to imagine the aristocratic Bonhoeffer aligning himself with any other denomination.

Merton, it is said, became a practising Christian (and a Catholic) at least in part through his discovery (via Etienne Gilson's book *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*) that

> no idea or sensible image could contain God, and further ... we must not be satisfied with such knowledge of God. [23]

Prior to his conversion to Catholicism Merton was concerned that the conception of God in the mind of many Christians did not seem worthy of faith and trust. Therefore he was, it appears, predisposed already toward the Contemplative tradition. And it was this tradition which, for good or ill, was to be his lifelong home.

## 3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer & Thomas Merton

Why choose these two figures from twentieth century Christianity for our study ?

First and foremost, personal interest motivated the choice of subjects for this study.

Secondly, the context of both is still very much our own - the Nazi Holocaust continues to trouble our own Theology and Spirituality, as do the various questions which faced Merton during the 1950s and 1960s. Therefore, there is an immediate interest and relevance in looking at the life and work of those who have grappled with the problems which face us still.

Thirdly, each presents us with a fascinating and fruitful integration of the various elements of the Context of Spirituality as outlined in this study. And so it is of interest to consider them alongside one another in a study such as this. Furthermore, there is also much common ground between Bonhoeffer the Lutheran and Merton the Catholic, such that their selection for this study is of particular significance.

Fourthly, as implied by the previous point, both have left us writings which combine in a way not typical of their contemporaries the Theological and the Spiritual, the personal &

biographical and the philosophical. This, of course, is of great significance for our study.

Finally, both may be said to be (albeit amongst others not considered here) trailblazers in the journey of faith, and as such present us with ideas which (in some cases) are only now taking root in the Church.

1. Palmer, 'The Spiritual Life: Apocalypse Now' Edwards, pp. 23 - 38]
2. Timmerman, p. 25
3. O'Meara, p. 128
4. O'Meara, p. 128
5. O'Meara, p. 129
6. O'Meara, p. 128
7. Rochelle, *A Call to Intellectual Spirituality*
8. Rochelle, *Would You Look Good on Wood ?*
9. Abalos, p. 307
10. Küng, p. 217
11. Rochelle, *A Call To Intellectual Spirituality*
12. McClendon [*Biography*], p. 37
13. See the above-mentioned works.
14. See the above-mentioned works.
15. McClendon, p. 332
16. See the above-mentioned work by Fowler.
    There is some debate as to whether any or all of the subjects of our study ever attained what Fowler refers to as 'Universalising Faith'. This stage has been omitted from our study in order to avoid unnecessarily speculative discussion. The works by Lovin and Conn discuss this question further as it applies to their respective subjects - see Bibliographies for details.
17. Fowler / Lovin, p. 27
18. Fowler / Lovin, p. 30
19. Fowler / Lovin, p. 30
20. See, for example, the piece 'A Devout Meditation In Memory of Adolf Eichmann' in **Raids on the Unspeakable** (New York: New Directions 1964).
21. Brown, p. 9
22. See O'Meara (above)
23. See Conn, p. 166 (For details see Merton Bibliography)

# 2

# Dietrich Bonhoeffer

# 1906 - 1945

## The Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Before we discuss the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, it is important to note that the major resource for any consideration of Bonhoeffer's life is the work by his friend and confidant Eberhard Bethge. [1] Therefore, whilst we are indebted to Bethge for all that he has done to bring the life and writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer to us, we must also be mindful of the fact that he is (by virtue of his marriage to Dietrich's sister) part of the extended family, and as such not the independent biographer we have for both Merton and King.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born on February 4 1906 in Breslau, Germany [now Wroclow, Poland]. His father was a psychiatrist, who in 1912 was appointed Professor of Psychiatry and Neurology at the University of Berlin. His mother's father and grandfather were both theologians. The family values as a whole were in the liberal / humanist tradition, and in Bethge's words the family

> derived its real education, not from school, but from a deeply rooted sense of being guardians of a great historical heritage and intellectual tradition. [2]

## Social Class

It is impossible to view Bonhoeffer in isolation from his social class. Even in prison the poem *Who Am I ?* relates that

> They often tell me
> I would step from my cell's confinement
> calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
> like a squire from his country house. [3]

and a photograph of the time bears this out. [4] Certainly from a theological perspective, Bonhoeffer grew to transcend his social class, and therefore he can write in the *Letters and Papers* that

> We have learnt to see the great events of world history from below ... from the perspective of those who suffer. [4]

But he remained a member of the German upper middle class, and like many of that class, saw himself as sharing in a corporate guilt at allowing Hitler to come to power. Therefore, it was not as a Christian alone, but as a Christian who saw himself as sharing in the guilt of his class, that Bonhoeffer sought involvement in the conspiracy against Hitler.

The *Fiction From Prison* contains many allusions to social class, and the commentaries and explorative essays which accompany these writings debate Bonhoeffer's own position. Following these commentators it would appear to be reasonable to conclude that whilst Bonhoeffer himself remained conscious of his class throughout his life, he was at the same time challenged by the Christian imperative of inclusiveness. This did not, however, mean

the abandonment of class structures, but rather an acceptance of one another despite them. [6] Nevertheless, there is a tension throughout Bonhoeffer's life, and the Bethge's illustrate this in their comment on the *Fiction* that some of the characters

> show a Bonhoeffer whom he himself had long outgrown both theologically and in his actions. [7]

John de Gruchy refers to what he sees as Bonhoeffer's personal and corporate 'liberation from privilege' and concludes:

> ever since he, the aristocrat, had learnt to share (paternalistically no doubt) with "families of peasants" as a young boy, he had discovered, step by step, how to see things from the perspective of the underdogs - the proletarian children in his confirmation class in one of Berlin's slums, the blacks in the ghetto of East Harlem, and finally, the Jews en route to Auschwitz. [8]

## Childhood

Aside from questions of social class, Bonhoeffer's childhood was undoubtedly significant for his later life and work. Kenneth E. Morris comments that 'almost all Bonhoeffer scholars' are agreed that

> it was the psychological context of his family, more so than the religious context of his church, or the political context of his country

that provides the most appropriate context for 'interpreting his thought and action'. [9] William Kuhns cites Bonhoeffer's later concerns for community, authority, full humanity, as referring back to

the experience of his childhood. And Morris quotes Bonhoeffer's own words in *Sanctorum Communio* as revealing a 'wealth of insight' about 'the social context' of his thought:

> The only sociological category that could possibly be compared to the church is the original patriarchal structure of the family. The father's will is that his children and servants live in community, and obedience to the father consists in preserving this community. [10]

Dietrich and his twin sister Sabine had been preceded by three brothers and two sisters, and one more sister was to follow. The children, we are told, were perceived as belonging in three groups: the three elder boys (Karl-Friedrich, Walter, and Klaus), the two girls (Ursula and Christine), and finally, the twins and the youngest child Susanne. [11]

The family was the social centre for much of its members' lives. Morris observes that

> The Bonhoeffers were an extremely close - knit family, so much so that even when grown the family continued to center their social and personal lives around the home of their parents. [12]

Within the family, Dietrich was both more independent (in his choice of a theological career), and yet also

> more closely allied with his family than were his brothers and sisters. [13]

Dietrich never decisively moved away from the family home, and so the question posed later by his brother's wife is perhaps a valid one. Emmi Bonhoeffer wondered whether Dietrich had been spoiled by his

mother, having lived at home unmarried longer than any of the other children in the family. [14]

Whatever the answer to these speculations, we do know that Dietrich was closer (and not only by virtue of age) to the female members of his family than to the males. His father and brothers had little interest in religion, and so the young Dietrich found his major role models displaying little interest in what was to him an important part of his life. Furthermore, the brothers were more expressive of their views on religion than was their father. And so, on the (rare) occasions when he did attend church, Dietrich was usually accompanied by his mother, and sometimes by a sister. Services normally were held in the house, and this was by far the normal practice. The many discussions on religion between the young Dietrich and his brothers have led many scholars to believe that his

> lifelong dialogue with the world was, in large part, a continuation of his childhood debates with these brothers. [15]

The Bonhoeffer family was hit by tragedy in April 1918, when Walter died, in an army field hospital, of wounds incurred in battle. This sad event had a profound effect on the family, and acted as a catalyst to young Dietrich's existing inclinations toward a theological vocation. Bethge writes of Dietrich at this time that

> His childish spirit responded with a fervent longing for the life beyond, and a fervent - though unconfessable - wish to transmit to the others his unqualified faith in eternity. [16]

Morris, in particular, presents much speculative material about the Bonhoeffer family's response to Walter's death. It is certain,

however, that Paula Bonhoeffer was deeply affected by her son's death, spending some time at a neighbour's house following the tragedy. Bethge observes that there was an inclination on the part of the older brothers to see Dietrich as in a way a replacement for Walter.

From young Dietrich's point of view, Walter's death presented him with an opportunity to serve his family by demonstrating to them that death need not be feared, and thereby restoring harmony to this precious community. As Morris writes:

> [Dietrich] embraced Christianity for what it promised for a family broken by death - if the sting could be snatched from death, harmony in his childhood world could once again prevail.

Therefore, even at this early stage in the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, we see a concern to witness to the reality of Christian faith. Some years later, in 1932, Bonhoeffer wrote of his childhood:

> Even in his boyhood he had liked imagining himself on his death-bed, surrounded by all those who loved him, speaking his last words to them... He would have liked to die young, to die a fine, devout death. He would have liked them all to see and understand that a believer in God dying was not hard, but was a glorious thing. [17]

It is arguable that this view of death is essentially that found later, in *The Cost of Discipleship*, where Bonhoeffer writes that when Christ calls a person, He calls them to 'come, and die'.

For,

> like Christ, the disciple is fundamentally dying for others, suffering an unjust and atoning death. [18]

For Bonhoeffer, therefore, the death of the Witness, like that of the Disciple, is essentially a source of healing and of positive effect. And indeed, such was the nature of the death he was to die in reality - a death for others, for the sake of the fragmented community of Germany.

The consummation of this call to be a witness to his family, which Bonhoeffer experienced so powerfully, is the later involvement in the plot against Hitler. For here, at last, Dietrich himself for the first time

> stood as a peer and an equal to his father and brothers... If he had to accept them for the first time as equals and co - workers, and not opponents, they, too, had to accept him on his own terms. [19]

Here perhaps is the biographical significance of Bonhoeffer's concern in the prison writings for 'maturity' and 'coming of age'. Morris refers to this possibility when he writes of the German word (Mundigkeit), rendered in English as 'coming of age', that

> Literally, it refers to the age of majority, or the age that a child becomes legally an adult. The metaphor that Bonhoeffer selects to characterise the world that is to receive his radically new theology, then, is a metaphor of personal liberation. [20]

And so Bonhoeffer's acceptance, as a Christian, into the circle of conspirators which included his brothers and other

humanist figures, was a sign for him that he had finally 'come of age' in the eyes of his family.

We are indebted to Bethge for introducing the three terms - Theologian, Christian, Contemporary - which are now widely referred to in discussions of Bonhoeffer's life. These three perceived stages in Bonhoeffer's life and development are, furthermore, effectively synonymous with three of the stages identified in James Fowler's Faith Development studies, to which reference was made in the **Introduction**.

## Theologian

It is from the time of Walter's death that we can meaningfully speak of Bonhoeffer's 'Decision to Become a Theologian', as Bethge puts it in his section heading. [21] Here we see evidence of faith and of a sense of vocation. From this time through the early 1930s, Bonhoeffer evidences what according to Fowler's categorisation is a Conventional faith.

### Studies

During the early 1920s, Bonhoeffer pursued theological studies at Tubingen and Berlin, spending a concluding year as Assistant Pastor of German Church in Barcelona [Spain]. Throughout

this time the young theologian rarely attended Church services, and Bethge speaks of him entering theological study

> from an essentially worldly base

and as not yet motivated by any love of the Church, discovery of Scripture, or even

> genuinely theological system of beliefs. [22]

The one overarching reality was his perceived vocation, his sense of call, over and above academic study, to be a Theologian. Despite its lack of concrete content and commitment, the call was at the centre of Bonhoeffer's life throughout these years of study.

Lovin and Gosser write of Bonhoeffer, that at this stage of faith

> He draws meaning and values from an unusually rich and diverse mix of sources... but he does not yet exhibit a personal commitment that knows the price of individuation and is prepared to pay it. [23]

Furthermore, for Bonhoeffer at this stage in his life

> vocational commitment was not a place to make a stand; it was a guide to exploration. [24]

This was the period from which *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being* emerged, the former as qualification for a Licenciate in Theology [1927], the latter as qualification for University teaching [1930].

It is not until the 1930s that Bonhoeffer evidences personal commitment to the faith and to the Church. Despite his significant theological and ecclesiastical involvement prior to this time, it was not until the 1930s that a personal commitment became apparent. Nevertheless, in 1924, on a visit to Rome with his brother Klaus, the eighteen year old student was struck by that sense of the universality of the Church which is characteristic of the Roman Catholic tradition. And this experience appears to have stayed with him, for in a sermon preached in Barcelona some four years later, the young assistant pastor compared this sense of universality with the Protestant understanding of the word 'Church' as

> commonplace ... [and which] does not lend wings to our religious feelings. [25]

Furthermore, during his time in Berlin, the theological student taught, very diligently, a Sunday School class. And, as has been mentioned already, Bonhoeffer spent the year 1928 working with a German congregation in Barcelona. There, we are told, he came face to face with 'his first case of suicide', 'severe poverty', and much unemployment. [26]

On his return from Spain to Berlin Bonhoeffer commenced work on his Habilitation Thesis in order to become qualified to teach at the University. At this time, and for much of the early 1930s, Bonhoeffer was undecided as between academic or church work. In a letter dated early 1933, he wrote to his brother Karl Friederich:

> It is queer how hard one finds it to make up his mind... Simply looking at one's own faculties and wondering whether

> they lie in this or any other field is completely useless. One's knowlege of oneself is inevitably poor. [27]

In September 1930 Bonhoeffer set sail for the United States, and a year at New York's prestigious Union Seminary. This academic year, from September through June, was a rich learning experience for the young theologian. His black friend Frank Fisher helped him to

> gain a detailed and intimate knowledge of the realities of Harlem life. [28]

Another friend, Frenchman Jean Lasserre,

> confronted him with an acceptance of Jesus' peace commandment which he had never met before...after meeting Lasserre the question of the concrete answer to the Biblical injunction of peace and that of the concrete steps to be taken against warlike impulses never left him again. [29]

Interestingly, Bethge also notes that

> Bonhoeffer was never a regular attendant at morning chapel

during this time. [30]

Of his year in New York Bonhoeffer himself wrote:

> The impression that has been made on me by today's advocates of the social gospel will leave its mark on me for a long time to come. [31]

# Christian

## Academic and Pastor

On his return to Germany Bonhoeffer entered a twofold academic and pastoral role. As well as lecturer at Berlin, he was also Student Chaplain, with pastoral and preaching responsibilities, and a youth secretary in the World Alliance of Churches. Bethge suggests that it

> was at this time ... that the second great phase of his career began. The phase of learning and roaming had come to an end. [32]

Thus, the 'Theologian' became a 'Christian', and in Fowler's terminology a Conventional gave way to an Individuative faith. Bethge writes of Bonhoeffer's two significant works of the later 1930s, *The Cost Of Discipleship* and *Life Together*, that by contrast with the works of the 1920s

> which used a conceptual language taken over from others, he now stated in his own terminology the contributions he wished to make to theology and the Church. [33]

## Ordination

On November 15 1931, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was ordained. Bethge reminds us that the event of Ordination would not have been for Bonhoeffer a particularly significant occasion:

> He did not seek out the ordinating ministers, none of whom were especially close to him either spiritually or personally, and later he hardly ever mentioned the occasion. That Sunday was not treated as an unusual one in the family, and in the afternoon he went to see his friend Franz Hildebrandt... [34]

In personal conversation with me Bethge has underlined this point regarding Bonhoeffer's own perception of his ordination. Yet, whatever the cause, there was at about this time a noticeable change in the young minister. Bethge writes of Bonhoeffer after 1931, that though he appeared to his students as having always been as he was then, yet he had changed. He now attended Church Services regularly, engaged in 'systematic meditation' on the Bible, and spoke of oral confession as 'an act to be carried out in practise'. [35] He also showed great interest in

a community life of obedience and prayer

and referred frequently to the Sermon on the Mount as an imperative to be acted upon rather than as a mirror to show up human sinfulness, which was the traditional Lutheran understanding. [36]

Of this change in himself, Bonhoeffer later wrote to a girl friend:

> I plunged into my work in a very unchristian way... I know that at that time I turned the doctrine of Jesus Christ into something of personal advantage to myself... I had never prayed, or prayed very little.
>
> Then something happened, something that has changed and transformed my life to the present day. For the first time I discovered the Bible... I had often preached, I had seen a great deal of the Church, and talked and preached about it - but I had not yet become a Christian...

> It became clear to me that the life of a servant of Jesus Christ must belong to the Church, and step by step it became plainer to me how far that must go. [37]

In their chapter on Bonhoeffer, Lovin and Gosser write of the change inherent in a shift from a Conventional to an Individuative stage of faith as being

> from learning to analyse, test, and compare the various theological frameworks to taking a single position that defines one's identity and guides one's acceptance of responsibility amd risks. [38]

It is not surprising, therefore, that this stage, concerned with total commitment, the establishment of one's identity, and the mapping out of clear and well defined theological boundaries, should be marked in Bonhoeffer's life by his leadership of the Finkenwalde community, the writing of *The Cost of Discipleship*, and in general by his involvement with the Confessing Church.

**Finkenwalde**

The time spent as Director of the Confessing Church Seminary at Finkenwalde was profoundly satisfying and fulfilling for Bonhoeffer. Bethge refers to a letter the Director wrote to students of his first session at the Seminary:

> The Summer of 1935... has been the fullest time of my life, both from the professional and from the human point of view. [39]

It would appear that Finkenwalde was the only home, outside the parental home, to which Bonhoeffer fully belonged. Certainly both Director and students speak warmly of their time at the Seminary. Furthermore, Finkenwalde soon became not only a Seminary but also a Community. Six students remained there permanently to make up the initial membership of the 'House of Brethren'. They were to be available

> to answer every emergency call from the Church

and so

> inevitably the House of Brethren saw a great deal of coming and going. [40]

Bonhoeffer was absorbed in the Sermon on the Mount from the early 1930s, but the lectures which in large part led to the book *The Cost of Discipleship* were delivered at Finkenwalde during the years 1935 - 1937. Bethge recalls his shock at discovering his friend's pacifist sentiments - for a Lutheran this was not possible ! In May 1935, Hitler announced conscription, a move hailed by the students at Finkenwalde as an opportunity to prove their patriotism. But for Bonhoeffer conscription presented a problem, the more so because any personal stand for pacifism would risk putting the entire Confessing Church in difficulties with the Nazi authorities. It was this lonely stand which was a significant factor in Bonhoeffer's decision to leave Germany for the U.S.A. in 1939, for by this time a personal stand against conscription could have pointed to the carefully disguised conspiratorial sentiments of his family. [41]

In 1937, however, the Finkenwalde Seminary (and therefore also the House of Brethren) was closed following Gestapo action and a police order for the closure of all such Seminaries. It was largely because of the premature dissolution of his experimental community that Bonhoeffer wrote *Life Together*, in order to record this fruitful experience of Christian community.

The work of Finkenwalde did continue for another three years in the restricted form of 'Collective Pastorates'. These were groups of ordinands who lived with pastors of the Confessing Church. Bonhoeffer's group lived in two vicarages, but officially were placed individually alongside specific ministers in the area. To the authorities, therefore, each was a 'learning minister' in a different parish. In reality, however, corporate training did continue. Nevertheless, even this strategy was to come to an end in 1940, when most of the ordinands were called up into the army, and the police shut down the pastorates' final home at Sighurdshof.

## The Confessing Church

The Confessing Church arose out of the decision in 1933 of the General Synod of the Old Prussian Church to adopt the so - called 'Aryan Clause'. Applied to the Church, this meant that

> only those could become ministers of the Church who were prepared to give "unconditional support to the National Socialist State and the German Evangelical Church", and were also of Aryan descent. [42]

Before the vote was taken to adopt the clause, Pastor Martin Niemoller led the opposition from the hall in protest, and in response formed the Pastor's Emergency League. Eventually the League

> fed into the larger movement that in 1934 resulted in the formation of the Confessing Church. [43]

Bonhoeffer himself spent the 19 months between October 1933 and April 1935 in pastoral charge of the German Church in Sydenham, South London, but this did not mean that he was out of touch with, or uninvolved in, German Church affairs. In May 1934, the Confessing Synod of Barmen declared that the theology of the Nazi allied 'German Christians' was a heresy. The Barmen Declaration, which emerged from the Synod, affirmed the Lordship of Christ over the Church, and was followed some months later by a decision to set up an alternative Church structure [the Confessing Church]. Thus, not only theologically but also organisationally, the Confessing Church repudiated the State Church:

> Those men who have taken over the government of the Church in the nation and in the districts have cut themselves off from the Christian Church by their actions. [44]

However, a year later and back in Germany, Bonhoeffer was dissatisfied with the Confessing Church. Gill summarises the situation:

> The Church, which is clearly out of bounds if it tries to be a force in political life, has every right to defend its own boundaries, order its own life, define its own beliefs.
> ... But the same Church does not then join those parties' or that governments' active opponents. [45]

These were the years of Bonhoeffer's fascination with the Sermon on the Mount. The writings making up *The Cost of Discipleship* are only fully understood in the light of the Confessing Church struggle. Here Bonhoeffer was seeking the implications of the Sermon for the life and spirituality of the Confessing Church. Hence the use of the material, later to be published as *The Cost of Discipleship*, at Finkenwalde - for here the future leadership of the Church was prepared for ministry.

Ultimately, Bonhoeffer's attitude towards the Confessing Church is ambivalent. In June 1936 an article appeared in which he stated that

> Anyone who knowingly cuts himself off from the Confessing Church in Germany cuts himself off from salvation. [45]

Yet it was also in the Summer of 1936, recalls Bethge, that Bonhoeffer first heard (from Hans von Dohnanyi) of the conspiracy against Hitler. By now the theological question of heresy had become concrete in the persecution of the Jews. And on this the Confessing Church was lamentably silent. Therefore we can surmise that the young theologian listened attentively to von Dohnanyi's words.

## Contemporary

How then did the Bonhoeffer of *The Cost of Discipleship* become the co - conspirator with Dohnanyi and the other

Germans who sought the end of Nazism ? In his involvement with the anti - Hitler conspirators, Bonhoeffer appears to admit that the imperatives of the Sermon on the Mount are not absolute, but relative. This, as will be discussed later, is a sign of the advent of a further stage of faith, and, in Bethge's words, of the Christian becoming a Contemporary.

The immediate situation is Bonhoeffer's impending eligibility for military conscription in 1939. At first this leads him to America, yet after only a few weeks he feels compelled to return. As he wrote in a letter to Reinhold Niebuhr explaining his about face:

> I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people. [47]

Morris suggests that these words reveal that it was his family to which Bonhoeffer felt compelled to return, and with whom he now sought to live out the duration of the war:

> It is to his family that he must prove his Christian mettle.

Furthermore

> When Bonhoeffer joined his family in political resistance, it was the first time in his life that he had stood as a peer and an equal to his father and brothers. [48]

McClendon refers to a letter from Bonhoeffer to Bishop Bell [of Chichester] in which he states that it is

> really only on Christian grounds that I find it difficult to do military service under the present conditions, **and yet there are only very few friends who would approve of my attitude.** [Bonhoeffer's emphasis] [49]

The inadequacy of the Confessing Church is illustrated here in the recognition that Bonhoeffer's declaration of himself as a Conscientious Objector would have scandalised the Church. Therefore McClendon suggests:

> no significant community existed that would have supported his open refusal of the draft call. Whereas the Abwehr [military intelligence] alternative, with its double - agent role, was indeed supported by the only functioning community of which he could still feel a part, his family with its network of allies and friends.

Hence, according to McClendon, the 'acknowledgement' in the *Ethics*

> of the role "good people" who were not like himself Christians [e.g. his family / his co-conspirators] might play as Christ's allies. [50]

Bonhoeffer therefore became an Agent of the Abwehr and a co - conspirator with those who sought to overthrow Hitler. The involvement with the Abwehr was partly in order to avoid conscription, but also a recognition that Conscientious Objection would not affect what was going on in Germany. To declare oneself a C.O. would solve the personal spiritual dilemma presented by military service but would leave the enormous injustices of the Nazi regime unaffected. Faced with the persecution of the Jews, only active involvement in the opposition to Hitler could make any difference. [51]

It is at this point in Bonhoeffer's life that Bethge speaks of the 'Contemporary Christian'. On his return from the U.S.A., Bonhoeffer entered

> fully into his contemporary world, his place, and his time. That means into a world which his bourgeois class had helped to bring about, rather than prevent. He accepted the weight of that collective responsibility, and began to identify himself with those who were prepared to answer for guilt and try tentatively to shape something new for the future, instead of merely protesting on ideological grounds, as had hitherto been usual on the ecclesiastical plane. So in 1939 the Theologian and Christian became [also] a Contemporary. [52]

To follow Christ as

> a disciple who follows timelessly - that now became a fatal privilege. To become a Contemporary... that alone was what it now meant to be a Christian. [53]

It is of this time also that Lovin and Gosser write of a transition from an Individuative to a Paradoxical - Consolidative faith. This shift is marked in Bonhoeffer by a

> recognition that there are forms of loyalty to Christ different from his own. [54]

The presence of ambiguity is very real during these years; all is not clearcut, and there is the realisation that absolute answers are often inadequate and, indeed, inappropriate. One sign that the Paradoxical - Consolidative stage of faith is emerging is recognition of the complexity of life, and this is certainly so of Bonhoeffer during the final years of the 1930s. This stage is also marked by a 'new reclaiming ... of one's past', and is at the same time

> ready for closeness to that which is different and threatening to self and outlook... [55]

One's identity having been established, one can now become involved with others with differing values and commitments, in Bonhoeffer's case including the father and brothers with whom he had never before been particularly close.

## The Abwehr

Bonhoeffer's work for the Abwehr both gave him opportunity to visit other countries and thus to pass on information about the progress of the conspiracy, and also excused him from military service. The work meant a double life, and Bethge remembers a time when his friend joined in a Nazi salute, explaining that

> We shall have to run risks for very different things now, but not for that salute. [56]

Bonhoeffer was clearly aware of the impossibility of absolute moral purity.

The details of Bonhoeffer's time in the service of the Abwehr are complex. Bethge states that Bonhoeffer still regarded the Confessing Church as his Church even though

> it could no longer take his part or identify itself with his cause. [57]

And so the journeys abroad were concerned with continuing ecumenical relationships as well as the more explicitly political aims of negotiations concerning the planned conspiracy and proposed peace

terms to be implemented following any such successful overthrow. In fact, the political negotiations were themselves generally carried on through Churchmen, for example Bishop Bell. Of these lonely months Bethge writes:

> He went his way alone, and was alone responsible for it, but he also knew that he could and must put a strain on the trust that his ecumenical friends had in him. [58]

When he was not travelling abroad under the auspices of the Abwehr, Bonhoeffer was writing or working on behalf of the Confessing Church and his former Finkenwalde students. In this way there was continuity with his activities prior to 1939:

> The chance that the Abwehr gave him to continue to live as a civilian set him free at the same time to go on doing what he had felt called to do for the last ten years: to stand by the young theologians even in the existing conditions of war, and to work at theology himself. [59]

However, the fact that some of these 'young theologians' were involved in fighting Hitler's war

> could only press Bonhoeffer on into conspiracy with more bitter determination. [60]

Amongst Bonhoeffer's activities during his service with the Abwehr was the so - called *Operation 7*, by which fourteen Jews were smuggled out of Germany to Switzerland. This was to be one of the matters on which he was interrogated following his arrest.

During this time living in the borderline situation of churchman and conspirator, Bonhoeffer penned the various writings

which make up the *Ethics*. He also wrote a number of theological papers for the Confessing Church.

## The Conspiracy

Swomley poses the question as to whether Bonhoeffer and his fellow conspirators were not naive in their plans for the assassination of Hitler and a new regime for Germany. He describes how the conspiracy was based on the sense of responsibility rightly felt by the military for allowing Hitler to come to power. The major figures were military men: Admiral Wilhelm Canaris (Head of the Abwehr); Col. Hans Oster (Abwehr Chief of Staff); General Holder (Chief of the General Staff). But the total number involved was far larger. Swomley suggests that Bonhoeffer shows his naivete by his continual optimism regarding the outcome of the conspiracy. In Swomley's opinion, it was unrealistic to believe that once Hitler was dead Nazism would collapse. It was also unrealisitic to expect the Allies to

> give up victory to let an unproven group of men govern Germany. [61]

We cannot deny in retrospect that the conspiracy was probably doomed to failure from the outset. Yet the fact remains that this group appeared to Bonhoeffer to be the only centre of active opposition to Hitler and to the Nazi regime, and hence the only opportunity for such involvement. And, as Bethge reminds us, there is also a very real sense in which involvement in the conspiracy was

seen in itself as an act of Atonement irrespective of its actual outcome. [62] For Bonhoeffer, the key concern is 'responsibility' - involvement in the conspiracy was the only responsible course of action in the horrific circumstances of Nazi Germany. Swomley, however, questions this claim and leaves us with a question as to

> the efficacy of encouraging "the coming generation" to believe that responsibility means the abandonment of reason and principle in order to use violence responsibly. [63]

Faced with the [nonviolent] resistance to Hitler of 'Martin Niemoller and hundreds of others', can we truthfully say of Bonhoeffer that his alone was the responsible action ? [64] Swomley clearly believes that we cannot. Yet it is important to be aware that no such claim is made by Bonhoeffer for himself. The decision concerning the responsible course of action in a given situation is intensely personal, and so comparison with the decisions of others is of little consequence, and judgment as to relative rights and wrongs irrelevant.

## Engagement

The one last major event in Bonhoeffer's life prior to his arrest in 1943 was his engagement to Maria von Wedemeyer in January of that year. Morris notes that

> [as] a boy and a young man, [Bonhoeffer] rarely made a friend

and that those he did make

> were typically drawn from his juniors and intellectual inferiors. [65]

Morris draws from this and other biographical evidence the likely conclusion that Bonhoeffer had

> a profound uneasiness with mutuality...
> [in its turn] a likely indicator of general conflict with authority. [66]

It is reported that whilst at the University of Berlin, the young theologian had a girlfriend. The identity of the girl and details of the relationship are [unfortunately] kept secret by the family, but it was a friendship which appears to have lasted some years, only coming to an end (at Bonhoeffer's initiative) when the Confessing Church (and hence also the Finkenwalde Seminary) was declared illegal in 1935. Bonhoeffer was obviously concerned at the risk posed to her by his, now illegal, involvement at Finkenwalde. Then in June 1942 (ironically in the midst of even more illegal activities) Bonhoeffer met again the young Maria von Wedemeyer. Six years before, Maria had met Pastor Bonhoeffer at the Finkenwalde Sunday congregation, and the 12 year - old had been told that she was not yet ready for Confirmation. Her older brothers were Confirmed by Bonhoeffer, but Maria had been told that she was not ready, and was glad. Six years on they met again, and Bethge remembers that his friend

> remarked afterwards that the renewed meeting occupied him more than he liked at first to admit. [67]

Then, in a letter to Bethge dated August 25 1942, Bonhoeffer wrote of the impossibility of another meeting with Maria being contrived

that she would find unobtrusive and inoffensive. [68]

Nevertheless, the two did meet again several times, and finally, in November, Bonhoeffer went to see Maria's mother to discuss their relationship. Frau von Wedemeyer proposed a year apart. In Bethge's words:

> Bonhoeffer rebelled. He wrote next day: "everywhere the same out-of-date ideas from past times. [69]

On January 17 1943, the couple were engaged, though as Gill adds: 'The parents are informed, not asked, this time...' [70] Within three months, Bonhoeffer was in Tegel Prison.

We do not know much about the relationship between Bonhoeffer and Maria von Wedemeyer. Maria was certainly no theologian, as is apparent from some of the references to her in the *Letter and Papers from Prison*. She was, of course, some twenty years younger than her fiance, a fact which offers further support for Morris' conclusion [above] concerning Bonhoeffer's 'profound uneasiness with mutuality'. [71] There are some 38 letters extant of those exchanged between the couple, although at present these are inaccessible to scholars. These letters may, in due course, fill out our understanding of this strange and tragic engagement. Furthermore, there is one particular characteristic of Dietrich Bonhoeffer which must be noted, and of which we may well learn more once the von Wedermeyer letters are at last made available. This is the fact, 'almost universally recalled by his intimates', that at family parties and other gatherings

Dietrich would often slip away to go to his room alone. [72]

Morris adds that there is evidence to suggest that Dietrich did discuss this practice with Maria. This in itself points to the depth and openness of their relationship, particularly in the light of Bonhoeffer's often professed dislike for what he regarded as excessive openness. [73] Maria may have been quite significantly younger than her fiance, but this seems to have been no barrier to genuine intimacy.

## Arrest and Imprisonment

On April 5 1943, Bonhoeffer was arrested and taken to Tegel Military Prison in Berlin. Bethge divides His friend's time in Tegel into three periods:

**April to July 1943** saw Bonhoeffer's interrogation, eventually resulting in a charge against him.

**August 1943 to April 1944** was spent waiting and hoping for a trial. Dates were fixed and then cancelled, and Bonhoeffer's frustration is evident from some of his letters of the time [see *Letters and Papers from Prison*].

Finally, **April to September 1944** was spent 'letting the case run out of steam.' This strategy came to an end as an [ultimately

abortive] escape plan presented itself, and then as Bonhoeffer was transferred to a Gestapo Prison. [74]

The enquiries and interrogations concerning Bonhoeffer covered four points. Firstly, his exemption from military service, and from Gestapo-imposed restrictions both on his movements and on public speaking, by way of his work for the Abwehr. Secondly, *Operation 7.* Thirdly, the journeys abroad, which were suspected [correctly] to have had nothing to do with military intelligence. Fourthly,

> The flagrant exemption from military service of officials of the Confessing Church. [75]

In the end, a charge of High Treason was dropped, and replaced by a lesser charge of 'sabotage against the armed forces'. [76] Bonhoeffer, however, protested his patriotism throughout, citing passages in his own works in which he echoes the traditional Lutheran reverence for the state [for example, passages in *The Cost of Discipleship* referring to Romans 13].

The cell at Tegel was

> A room about six feet by nine feet with a plank bed, shelf, stool and bucket, a board door with an observation hole looking from the outside in and a skylight window above head height on the opposite side. [77]

Before long Bonhoeffer 'became an influential inmate of the house.' [78] A nephew of the Berlin City Commandant, he was a popular figure with many of the staff. And so there are photographs of Bonhoeffer and

some of his fellow prisoners posing with one of their guards in the prison grounds. So also were many letters able to be smuggled into and out of the prison by courtesy of a sympathetic guard. The Bonhoeffer family, for its part, regularly sent food and books and other items in to Dietrich, and occasionally extra visits were made possible too.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer appears to have been a source of strength and support to staff and prisoners alike, but there was another side to the man, as the poem *Who Am I ?* indicates. Written in June / July 1944, the poem juxtaposes the Bonhoeffer who would step from his cell 'like a squire from his country house', who would talk with his warders as though he were in command, who would bear the 'days of misfortune' like 'one accustomed to win', with the Bonhoeffer who longed for freedom 'restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage', who yearned for colours, flowers, birdsong, who thirsted for 'words of kindness, for neighbourliness...powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance'. In the end, the poem concludes:

> Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine. [79]

But the inner conflict remains.

Another poem, together with the more recently published *Fiction From Prison*, points to Bonhoeffer's absorption in the past during his imprisonment. The poem *The Past* speaks of his feelings after Maria had left after a visit. The slamming of the door behind his fiancee

becomes a symbol of his past life

and the question is posed as to

> Why time has to have this character, why what remains is always life which is lost in the past. [90]

Nevertheless, in front of others, whether his family, his fellow inmates or the prison staff, Bonhoeffer retained his composure. On July 20 1944, the attempt on Hitler's life failed, and the conspiracy was blown wide open. Bonhoeffer heard of the failure on July 21 via a foreign radio broadcast overheard in the prison. On hearing the news he

> was convinced that his fate was immediately sealed. [91]

And yet the self disciplined life continued. He continued to read and write, to meditate on Scripture, to take exercise. Of the last of these, Bethge writes:

> From the first day on he kept himself physically fit by doing exercises and eating whatever nourishing food his family and friends sent to his cell. [92]

It is important, in the light of some speculative interpretations of the prison writings, to note that - as far as we know - Bonhoeffer continued his devotional practices right to the end of his life. [93]

The final months of Bonhoeffer's life were spent in the Gestapo prison, to which he was transferred in October 1944, and where he underwent further interrogation. Communication between Bonhoeffer and his family continued after his transfer, but conditions

were less amenable than at Tegel. Finally, in February 1945 he was transferred to Buchenwald, and from there came eventually to Flossenberg on that grey morning of April 9 when his earthly life was abruptly ended by the executioner's noose.

On the last full day of his life, imprisoned in transit in a school, Bonhoeffer conducted a Worship Service for his fellow prisoners. It was the First Sunday after Easter, Low Sunday. Ever sensitive to those who did not share his Christian faith, Bonhoeffer had been reluctant to conduct a service because most of the prisoners were Roman Catholic, and there was as well one atheist with whom he was particularly friendly. However, convinced that all desired it, the pastor prayed and spoke on the day's Scripture texts.

Soon after this, the call came for Pastor Bonhoeffer, and he was taken to Flossenberg Concentration Camp. There, during the night of April 8 - 9, he was tried with other surviving conspirators and, on the morning of April 9, barely a month before the suicide of the man whose death he had sought, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed.

Some years later, the Flossenberg camp doctor wrote:

> Through the half-open door in one room of the huts I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison garb, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that

> I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God. [84]

Bonhoeffer's last recorded words are indeed a witness to the fact that, for the Christian, death is not to be feared. To fellow prisoner Payne Best, as he left for Flossenberg, Bonhoeffer is recorded as saying:

> This is the end, for me the beginning of life. [85]

In his death is the consummation of the witness of his life. In his death, that childhood dream of being a witness to the power of God even over death, became a reality.

# The Thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

## Introduction

In considering the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer we will again follow Bethge's divisions of his friend's life:

### Theologian

Bonhoeffer's earliest writings are *Sanctorum Communio* [1], and *Act and Being* [2]. These will be considered together with the lecture series *Creation and Fall* [3], which de Gruchy describes as

> an exposition of Bonhoeffer's earlier "theology of sociality", presented in a more accessible form [4]

and the later series of lectures on *Christology* [5]. These lectures are reconstructed from students' notes, as Bonhoeffer's own teaching notes have not been preserved.

### Christian

The next group of writings to be considered are *The Cost of Discipleship* [6], *Spiritual Care* [7], and *Life Together* [8]. Again, the first two of these works were originally given as lectures; the

former, however, was prepared and published by Bonhoeffer himself whilst the latter was published some years after his death.

**Contemporary**

The final group of writings comprises the *Ethics* [9], *Fiction From Prison* [10], and *Letters and Papers From Prison* [11]. These works are all incomplete and have been published after Bonhoeffer's death. There is some scholarly debate as to the intended order of the material in the *Ethics*, and there have been a number of suggestions offered [12]. However, even in its present (carefully thought out) form, the *Ethics* can in no way be regarded as representing Bonhoeffer's ultimate intention for his work. As far as the prison *Fiction* is concerned, there is no indication that Bonhoeffer ever intended this for publication. The *Letters and Papers* also were never intended for publication, although many of the thoughts and ideas discussed therein would likely have appeared in Bonhoeffer's projected work on *The Essence of Christianity*.

It is widely acknowledged that, on the whole, the English translations of Bonhoeffer's works at present leave much to be desired. A uniform, newly translated, English language edition of the entire *corpus* is planned, but will not be available for quite some time. For this study the existing English translations have been used, though mindful of their inadequacy. With this in mind, reference is made at various points to the anthology edited and introduced by John de Gruchy, where his notes or translation correct

inadequacies in the current English editions. Furthermore, in discussion of the *Christology*, reference is made to the (avowedly superior) edition of 1977, translated by Edwin Robertson. [13]

There are a number of other, secondary works by Bonhoeffer which have not been mentioned above. Many of these have been published in English translation in some form or other, and reference will be made to some of these in the course of our discussion. However, the focus will be on the major works referred to above, as representing the main progression and thrust of Bonhoeffer's thought.

As we have seen, Bethge's references to Bonhoeffer as Theologian, Christian, and Contemporary, are supported by consideration of Bonhoeffer's life from the perspective of Faith Stage Theory. [14] Although the term **Discipleship** is only explicitly used in the work of the second stage, it is the contention of this study that the term can appropriately be used of Bonhoeffer's spirituality throughout his life. A notion of **Discipleship**, it is suggested, is implicit throughout Bonhoeffer's work, being found in embryo in the earliest works and being taken to its logical conclusions in the later. Therefore, Bonhoeffer's life and thought may be said to be essentially continuous from beginning to untimely end.

# Theologian

## *Sanctorum Communio*

At the beginning of this, his first published work of theology, Bonhoeffer wrote:

> The more theologians have considered the significance of the sociological category for theology, the more clearly the social intention of all the basic Christian concepts has emerged. [15]

The entire work is what de Gruchy describes as

> an exploration of the sociality of Christianity [16]

and it is interesting to note that this was a theme to which Bonhoeffer later returned in the *Letters and Papers*. [17]

A number of themes can be traced to their origins in *Sanctorum Communio*. Firstly, Bonhoeffer's concept of the Church as

> Christ existing as the congregation. [18]

The congregation, or community, is a 'collective person', and so Bonhoeffer can claim that

> Christ Himself is the Church. [19]

For

> the Church is the presence of Christ, [just] as Christ is the presence of God. [20]

Secondly, Bonhoeffer refers to the Christian call to love of neighbour. Such love, he claims, is not to be directed toward God in our neighbour, but rather toward our neighbour for her own sake. Therefore, the claim of the neighbour meets us as the claim of our neighbour herself, and not as the claim of God. Furthermore, such love has to be worked out in concrete acts of love:

> our being for one another...has to be actualised through the act of love. [21]

However, Bonhoeffer does not leave us with a general invitation to engage in acts of love. He is concerned to show the extremes to which Christian love is called to go. Such love demands that we

> should sacrifice our own interest... this may include sacrificing even communion with God itself. Here is manifested the love which of its own free will is ready to incur God's wrath for its brother's sake. [22]

Yet love for our neighbour cannot lead to abandonment by God. Because of his obedience

> to the command that he should surrender himself completely to his neighbour... for this very reason in wishing to be banished from God he remains in the closest union with Him. At the point where the most terrible conflict with God seems to rage, the deepest peace is established... [23]

This awareness that God is to be experienced most profoundly where He seems most absent is the insight of Martin

Luther's *Theologia Crucis*, a motif which is particularly important to Bonhoeffer's later work. Furthermore, the demand that we be ready even to incur God's wrath for the sake of our neighbour, fittingly describes Bonhoeffer's own final years of conspiratorial involvement.

Thirdly, Bonhoeffer is concerned to observe how the individual is formed not through self - reflection but through concrete responsibility:

> It is a Christian recognition that the person, as a conscious person, is created in the moment when a man is moved, when he is faced with responsibility, when he is passionately involved in a moral struggle, and confronted by a claim which overwhelms him. Concrete personal being arises from the concrete situation. [24]

Throughout his life, Bonhoeffer displayed an aversion to reflection upon the self, being concerned rather to focus attention upon the objectivity of Christ and of neighbour. Here objectivity and concreteness is opposed to subjectivity and abstraction.

Fourthly, and finally, it is important to note Bonhoeffer's hope, expressed in *Sanctorum Communio*, that all people will ultimately be saved. For Bonhoeffer

> No justification and sanctification of man is conceivable if he is not granted the certainty that with him God also draws to Himself all those for whose guilt he is responsible.

Of course, he adds,

> to speak about this is only to hope [25]

Yet it was his hope at this early point in his theological career, and there is no reason to believe that he ever moved from such a hope. Certainly such a view is quite compatible with his later thought on the relationship between the Church and the world.

Even at this early stage, therefore, Bonhoeffer was articulating ideas which were to form an important part of his later thought. From the outset of his theological career, Bonhoeffer was concerned with the presence of Christ in the concrete reality of the collective person, the Church. For him, Christ existed in the form of the Christian congregation, and it was in the concrete reality of the Church that He was to be encountered. Such is the collectivity of the Church that its members are called to acts of love such that the demands of love in the concrete situation take priority even over one's communion with God. For God is most profoundly met in the carrying out of one's responsibilities of love in the world. Finally, Bonhoeffer harboured the hope that eventually all the boundaries between Church and world would disappear. This concern does not leave him, though the focus of his hope moves from the *eschaton* to the present, as he speaks more and more of finding Christ 'in the midst of life'. [26]

Therefore, the basic trajectories of Bonhoeffer's thought can be seen to have been established even in his first published work.

### *Act and Being*

In this work, Bonhoeffer is concerned to emphasise, like Karl Barth, that the initiative in revelation is wholly with God. Hence, the focus is not to be on ourselves, but on One who is outside ourselves and is made known to us through revelation. And so Bonhoeffer writes of humanity's state of

> "being already" "with reference to" some other thing which transcends him. [27]

However, at this point Bonhoeffer parts company with Barth. The question concerns the so-called *finitum capax infiniti* - whether the finite is capable of bearing the infinite. Historically, Lutheranism has said 'yes', Reformed theology 'No'. And so the debate continues. Bethge writes of the two positions:

> One may generalise: while Barth, in order to save God's majesty, started by pushing God away; Bonhoeffer starts by drawing Him in - in order to save the same majesty of God. [28]

Bonhoeffer is concerned to defend his concept of 'Christ existing as the congregation'. He writes:

> God **is there**, which is to say: not in eternal non - objectivity but..."haveable", graspable in His word within the Church. [29]

Elsewhere, he refers in a footnote to Luther. The Reformer wrote that it is to

> the honour and glory of our God...that, giving Himself for our sake in deepest condescension, he passes into the flesh, the bread, our hearts, mouths, entrails, and suffers also for

> our sake that he be dishonourably handled, on the altar as on the cross. [30]

The essence of the *finitum capax*, therefore, is the possibility of finite reality being the bearer of the presence of Christ. If such a possibility is accepted, Christ may indeed be said to exist as the congregation, and furthermore, *our fellow members* can be said

> even [to] become Christ for us in what they both demand and promise, in their existential impositions upon us from without.

At the same time, they become also

> the pledge of revelation's continuity [31] ...[the] Christian congregation [being] God's final revelation...[where] Christ has come the very nearest to humanity. [32]

One commentator goes so far as to suggest that the *finitum capax*

> could well be the theological motto of Bonhoeffer's whole theological development. [33]

Certainly it is the key to much that Bonhoeffer later was to write concerning the encounter with Christ in the neighbour, and therefore is of some importance in the development of his concept of Discipleship. In this connection, it is important to note Bonhoeffer's claim that the Church is not a human community with Christ added, but is a community created by Christ and in which He reveals Himself. For such a view of the Church opens up the possibility of finite reality indeed being the bearer of the demands of Christ. [34]

Another important discussion in *Act and Being* concerns Bonhoeffer's view of sin. Again following Luther, Bonhoeffer writes of the essence of human sin as 'self - incapsulation'. This view of sin stands behind much of Bonhoeffer's later work, and stands alongside his own personal aversion to what he saw as excessive introspection. Thus in the the writings making up the *Ethics*, for example, the concern increasingly focuses not on the attainment of goodness or the purity of the self, but rather on obedience to Christ.

Although the original context of *Act and Being* is largely forgotten today [35], this work is an important part of the Bonhoeffer *corpus*. Most particularly it is important for its defence of the *finitum capax*. Henceforward for Bonhoeffer, revelation is seen as rooted not in Doctrine, or in (religious) experience, nor in the Church as institution. Rather, revelation is rooted in the People of God - in 'Christ existing as the congregation'.

The two lecture series which we now consider mark the transition from **Theologian** to **Christian**. The lectures which make up the work *Creation and Fall* present an interpretation of Genesis 1 - 3 from the perspective of Bonhoeffer's 'Theology of Sociality' [de Gruchy above]. The lectures which make up the *Christology* present Bonhoeffer's view of Jesus Christ, and a student of his class at the time remembers their reception:

> He looked like a student himself when he mounted the platform. But then what he had to say so gripped us all that we were no longer there to listen to this very young man but we were there because of what he had to say... I have never heard a lecture that impressed me nearly so much. [36]

## The Lectures: *Creation and Fall*

## *Christology*

In the lectures comprising *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer presents his doctrines of Creation and Sin. Humanity is created free, but freedom consists in relationship, for

> only in relationship with the other am I free. [37]

Therefore, to be living outside of that relationship with the other person is to deny our creatureliness and the limit imposed upon us by God. For

> The other person is the limit placed upon me by God. [38]

As long as I love the other I shall not transgress my creaturely limit. However, once he ceases to love the other person man 'can only hate his limit'. [39] And so, the characteristics of sinful humanity are both its living solely out of its own resources, and its living alone without regard for the other.

Once humanity transgresses its limit, it

> no longer needs the Creator... [for man] has become a creator himself, to the extent that he creates his own life.

This leads to religion - to

> man's going beyond the given word of God and procuring his own knowledge of God. [40]

Here is Bonhoeffer's Theological Anthropology receiving its first detailed treatment. Here also we find the young Theologian's first reference to Orders of Preservation. Traditional Lutheran Theology speaks of the Divine 'Orders of Creation', Bonhoeffer instead speaks of

> God's orders of preservation on the way to Christ...not orders of creation but of preservation.

These 'have no value in themselves', but

> are accomplished and have purpose only through Christ...[for] God's new action towards man is that He preserves him in his fallen world, in his fallen orders, on the way to death, approaching the resurrection, the new creation, on the way to Christ. [41]

This conception of Orders of Preservation reappears in the *Ethics*.

Finally, *Creation and Fall* presents (via some rather strained Biblical exegesis) the important Biblical teaching that God is to be found in the middle of life and not round its edges. How and why this is so is revealed in the next work to be discussed here - the *Christology*.

The lectures which make up the *Christology* are presented, in their published form, as a series of questions. The first two concern "The Present Christ", and ask What Form He Takes and Where He is to be Found. The third is addressed to "The Historical Christ", and asks 'Who is He ?' [42]

For Bonhoeffer, Christ takes form in three ways - in the Word, the Sacrament, and the Church. It is his answer to the question 'Where ?', however, which is more revealing of the originality of his thought. For in answer to his own question he writes:

> It is the nature of the person of Christ to be in the centre both spatially and temporally.
>
> [Furthermore] The one who is present in Word, sacrament, and Church is in the centre of human existence, of history, and of nature. [43]

For Bonhoeffer, Christ is at the centre of history as

> the destroyer and the fulfiller of all the messianic expectations of history.

Therefore, history's meaning is to be found 'in the humiliated Christ.' [44] And so, de Gruchy observes

> In so far as Christ is present in the Church, the Church is then placed at the centre of history and the state. [45]

Bonhoeffer then addresses the question of the 'historical Christ'. Here, he believes, we meet God:

> Everything hangs upon the fact that God in His totality and Sovereign Majesty is this Incarnate One who meets us in Jesus. One of the first theological statements must remain, that where God is, He is totally there. [46]

Here is the *finitum capax*, presented as the essential presupposition for Bonhoeffer's Christology - that where God is, God is totally there. Therefore, God is no less present in the sufferings of Christ

than in His triumph. This is the *Theology of the Cross* at its most profound, indeed an enduring theme throughout Bonhoeffer's thought.

The Theologian becomes a Christian. Christ takes hold of the young Bonhoeffer and stands at the very centre of his existence. It is time for detachment to give way to commitment, for speculation to give way to committed enquiry. The admirer of Christ now becomes a disciple of Christ. Of course, for one such as Bonhoeffer, Discipleship did not mean an end to inquiry, to development and growth. Rather, as John de Gruchy writes of Bonhoeffer, his commitment to truth [ie Christ] gave him

> the necessary freedom to write, say and do what he did.

Like his Berlin professor Harnack, Bonhoeffer's theology too

> was governed by a commitment to the truth and therefore had a freedom to follow wherever truth led. [47]

This commitment to truth, and the accompanying freedom to follow wherever it leads, is characteristic of the concept of Discipleship, and most particularly that embodied in the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

## Christian

### *The Cost of Discipleship*

It is important to read *The Cost of Discipleship* mindful of the place and time out of which it arose. For the work arose out of the Germany of the 1930s, coming together in the midst of the Confessing Church struggle. Therefore, *C.D.* is not a general work of theology / spirituality, but a specific word addressed to a specific situation. As William Kuhns points out:

> any real understanding of [*C.D.*] must rely on the Confessing Church struggle. [48]

For Bonhoeffer, the German Evangelical Church were misusing the (Lutheran) doctrine of Justification by Faith

> to justify their passive acceptance and even support of the status quo.

The issue at stake in the Church struggle was the Church's sole allegiance to Jesus Christ:

> A living and obedient faith in Jesus Christ had been replaced by belief in a doctrine about faith, the Sermon on the Mount had been conveniently side-stepped by regarding it as law rather than gospel. The result was "cheap grace" instead of the "costly grace" of true discipleship. [49]

Thus had the German Church been captured by Nazism, with Christ invoked to bless the regime.

Because *C.D.* arose out of a specific context, it is important that it not be read as a timeless word to the Church but rather as a concrete word addressed to a concrete situation. For Bonhoeffer was later to contradict in his actions some of the imperatives to which he refers in *C.D.*. However, he was to do so in the name of Christ. William Kuhns writes, for example, of Bonhoeffer's pacifist views, that they

> had been an integral part of his Christian beliefs largely because of the historical conditions which he recognised called for peace.

But the historical conditions were to change, and so Bonhoeffer shifted his stance, for

> he believed more deeply in relating to the present, in identifying the concrete needs of the moment, than in simple pacifism. [50]

It is important at this point to discuss Bonhoeffer's views on pacifism. In his biography, Eberhard Bethge asserts that Bonhoeffer 'never' became 'a convinced pacifist'. [51] Others, however, hold that Bonhoeffer did become a pacifist in the 1930s only to overturn that position in his later involvement with the conspiracy. As yet the question has not been resolved, and the nature and extent of Bonhoeffer's commitment to pacifism during the 1930s remains open to discussion.

There are a number of factors which must be brought into consideration in such a discussion. Firstly, Bonhoeffer himself writes from prison in 1944 that

> I'm firmly convinced - however strange it may seem - that my life has followed a straight and unbroken course, at any rate in its outward conduct. [52]

Secondly, Bethge also rejects any supposition of a clear shift from

> a conviction of non-violence to a conviction of using violence; for me this does not at all express what was going on. [53]

Thirdly, there is the concrete and contextual nature of Bonhoeffer's thought. If we see Bonhoeffer's commitment to a form of pacifism in the 1930s as his response to a concrete word of Christ to the Church, and as such, as a concrete, contextual ethic rather than an absolute, there is no inconsistency. This view is also more in keeping with the dynamic nature of Discipleship - following truth wherever it led, even into apparent self-contradiction.

Therefore, it is suggested that Bonhoeffer's concern for peace, and his apparent pacifism during the 1930s, was contextual, arising out of a sense of responsibility in the given situation rather than a concern for personal purity. Thus, for him, pacifism was situational rather than absolute. Bonhoeffer often expresses his rejection of an ethics of abstract principle, and for him absolute pacifism would have been such an ethic.

There are other scholars, however, who believe that there is a shift in Bonhoeffer's thought from pacifism to non-pacifism. Larry Rasmussen believes that:

> All the twisting possible cannot make the author of *The Cost of Discipleship* a volunteer for assassinating even Adolf Hitler. [54]

Furthermore, French pacifist Jean Laserre is reported to have commented, regarding a peace gathering in Mexico in 1931 which Bonhoeffer attended, that the young theologian made the the strongest theological plea for peacemaking that he had ever heard. [55]

Yet this observation, which would appear at first to support claims for Bonhoeffer's pacifism, may also provide grounds for the claim that he never was an absolute pacifist. For it can be argued that in his involvement in the conspiracy, Bonhoeffer remained a "peacemaker", even if not a pacifist. Of the term "peacemaker", G. Clarke Chapman suggests that it

> conveys better Bonhoeffer's wholistic concern for responsibility and justice. [56]

In the 1930s, "peacemaking" entailed a clear and committed witness for peace, addressed both to the Church and to the world. By the 1940s, however, "peacemaking" had come to mean an end to Nazism, and for Bonhoeffer and his fellow conspirators - and end to Hitler.

And so the debate continues. This study follows Kuhns, Chapman and others, and holds that Bonhoeffer never became a pacifist of absolute principle, but rather advocated pacifism in the 1930s as a result of an overarching concern with what Chapman terms "peacemaking". Such a position does not deny the sincerity or integrity of Bonhoeffer's pacifist views at the time, but maintains

that they were not primarily regarded as ends in themselves, but rather as the most appropriate way at the time through which to bring about a new world order. [57]

The structure of *C.D.* is obscured in the English edition because the work is divided into four sections instead of the original two. Originally, Part One of the work (sections 1 - 3 in English) presented teaching on Discipleship from the Synoptic Gospels, especially the Sermon on the Mount. Part Two of the work (section 4 in English) dealt with

> The same theme, but now in terms of Pauline theology. [58]

In this way, Bonhoeffer sought to

> show that following Jesus the suffering Messiah (the Synoptics) is an integral part of believing in and obeying Christ as Lord (Paul), [and therefore] to counter the Lutheran tendency to separate justification by faith from costly discipleship both in theology and practice. [59]

The content of *C.D.* is rooted in, but goes beyond, the theology of Martin Luther. One way of describing the work would be to say that it takes Luther's *Theology of the Cross* with the utmost seriousness and pursues its implications to their logical conclusion. The message of the work is summed up in Bonhoeffer's assertion that

> Only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes. [60]

From the outset, *C.D.* is a return to Jesus Christ as the 'sole object' of the Church's existence, and to the central question

What is His will for us today ? [61]

Bonhoeffer begins his discussion with a comparison between "Cheap Grace" and "Costly Grace". Cheap Grace is 'the deadly enemy of our Church'. It means forgiveness without repentance as

> the sacraments, the forgiveness of sin, and the consolations of religion are thrown away at cut prices. [62]

For the Church has

> poured forth unending streams of grace. [Yet] the call to follow Jesus in the narrow way was hardly ever heard. [63]

Costly Grace, by contrast

> is **costly** because it calls us to follow, and it is **grace** because it calls us to follow **Jesus Christ**. [64]

Costly Grace means repentance and discipleship:

> When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. [65]

The call to follow Jesus Christ is not, however, a call to a specific course of action, for Discipleship is simply

> a decision, either for or against Jesus Christ. [66]

And so Bonhoeffer is concerned to stress that Discipleship does not provide a programme for living and acting, nor a standard of right and wrong to apply to others. [67] Rather

> To follow in [Jesus'] steps is something which is void of all content. It gives us no intelligible programme for a way of life, no goal or ideal to strive after. It is not a cause

> which human calculation might deem worthy of our devotion. At the call, Levi leaves all that he has - but not because he thinks he might be doing something worthwhile, but simply for the sake of the call. [68]

There is no room here for human calculation or reflection, but only for absolute dependence on the will of Jesus:

> It is not our judgment of the situation which can show us what is wise, but only the truth of the word of God. [69]

At the heart of Discipleship is obedience - itself a work of God's grace in us. Today we would speak of the inseparability of Orthodoxy [right belief] and Orthopraxis [right practice], but Bonhoeffer expressed the importance of obedience in the assertion that 'only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes.' [70] This was a necessary corrective to the Lutheran emphasis on faith as all-important, with good works as secondary and derivative. Such a view, although firmly established in Lutheranism, easily led to complacency and compromise - with the so-called "German Christians" as a prime example.

Because we are called to follow Jesus Christ, we are called to suffer. The Cross is an important sign for Bonhoeffer of the costliness of Discipleship. 'The Cross', he writes

> is not the terrible end of an otherwise god-fearing and happy life [but rather] meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. [Such suffering] is the fruit of an exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ... It is not an accident, but a necessity.

Thus Bonhoeffer can go so far as to claim that the disciple

> is a disciple only in so far as he shares his Lord's suffering and rejection and crucifixion. [71]

The cross of Jesus Christ is

> the very place where something extraordinary has been made visible... [72]

This is also the task of the community of disciples, and so Bonhoeffer calls for the Sermon on the Mount to be heeded with the utmost seriousness. For the "extraordinary" is made visible in the Church as it hears and obeys the Sermon. This is best exemplified in the call to love our enemies - for here the "natural" and the "extraordinary" stand clearly in contrast. Furthermore, the "extraordinary" 'never merges into' what Bonhoeffer terms "the same". In other words:

> there is no deed [or offence] on earth so outrageous as to justify a different attitude [in response]. [73]

The "extraordinary" is most clearly expressed in love for our enemies, and so Bonhoeffer permits no Lutheran conception of the "Two Kingdoms" to blur the clear distinction between the command of Jesus and the way of life of 'natural man'. [74] The strength of Bonhoeffer's conviction here is summed up in his claim that:

> the only way to overcome evil is to let it run itself to a standstill because it does not find the resistance it is looking for. [75]

For Bonhoeffer, Christ is the Mediator between humanity and God, but also between individual human beings. Thus, in the middle of all human relationships stands Christ. The Christian

> belongs to Christ alone, and his relationship with the world is mediated through him. [76]

And so Morris observes:

> Discipleship is premised on the assumption, rooted in the Sermon on the Mount, that following Christ is identical with serving others in Christian integrity. [77]

There is a tension here regarding the Christian's relationship to the world. Throughout *C.D.*, Bonhoeffer is concerned to maintain the distinction between the Church and the world. Yet the disciple is not to leave the world (even if that were possible), but is rather

> to stay in the world with God... [which] means simply to live in the rough and tumble of the world and at the same time remain in the Body of Christ, the visible Church, to take part in its worship and to live the life of discipleship. [In this way] we bear testimony to the defeat of this world. [78]

In this connection, Bonhoeffer refers approvingly to Luther's conception of secular vocation as an opportunity to live out the Christian life in the world. However, Bonhoeffer does not follow Luther in postulating a "Two Kingdoms" doctrine, for this would cut across the total claim of Jesus upon his followers.

F. Burton Nelson, in a short article discussing Bonhoeffer's *Meditations on Psalm 119*, and especially that on verse 19 ['I am a sojourner on earth; do not hide your commandments from me'], observes that whilst in *C.D.*

> [the] accent fell on the heavenly side of the Christian's existence, constantly pointing forward to the "things that

> are above"...in his continuing meditation on the sojourning motif [he] discerned the peril of overly stressing the heavenly destination of the Christian pilgrim. He was aware that such concentration could possibly lead to a kind of "godless homesickness" for the life to come. Without surrendering the sojourner-pilgrim-stranger-alien theme, Bonhoeffer in his profound commentary on Psalm 119 underlines the earthly side of the equation. This world is not to be scorned or derided or neglected or left to its own pursuits. [79]

Burton Nelson also cites Eberhard Bethge's comment from his biography of Bonhoeffer:

> For years Bonhoeffer had meditated on the Christian's "sojourning", and had practiced it personally, ecclesiastically, and ecumenically. [After *C.D.*] ...he began to look at the qualifying phrase "on earth". How was that to be understood ? [80]

Hence the essential continuity, yet development, between *C.D.* and the later works is clearly illustrated.

Bonhoeffer's view of the Church in *C.D.* draws on the Pauline conception of the Body of Christ. Bonhoeffer writes that

> All men are "with Christ" as a consequence of the Incarnation.

Thus Christ's

> life, death and resurrection are events which involve all men...

Christians, however,

> are "with Christ" in a special sense. [81]

For Bonhoeffer, the Church community is "Christ existing as the congregation", and so Jesus Christ - "The New Man" - 'is at once Himself and His Church.' [82]

Baptism marks the individual's incorporation into the Body of Christ, for

> The Body of Christ is identical with the new humanity which He has taken upon Him...
> In Baptism a man puts on Christ, and that means the same as being incorporated into the body... No one can become a new man except by entering the Church, and becoming a member of the Body of Christ. [83]

Kuhns writes of the view of Church and World in the *Ethics*, that by contrast with *C.D.* and Luther and Barth

> Bonhoeffer sees the Church as the already Christian world conscious of itself in this community of men. The Church, then, is separate from the world only as a "summoning of the world into the fellowship of this body of Christ to which in truth it already belongs."' [84]

However, in *C.D.*, this tension between Church and World is as yet unresolved, and so Bonhoeffer can write some years later:

> I once thought I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life, or something like it. It was in this phase that I wrote *The Cost of Discipleship*. Today I can see the dangers of this book, though I am prepared to stand by what I wrote. [85]

The key to Bonhoeffer's development subsequent to *C.D.* is his view of the world and its relation to the Church, and this theme will recur in our study as we consider the later works.

In his section on Pauline thought, Bonhoeffer stands clearly within the Lutheran tradition. He speaks of Christ's call in Word and Sacrament, though he seems to add as a third mark of the Church: "Christ existing as the congregation". [86] Indeed (as has already been noted), throughout *C.D.* Bonhoeffer can be seen to follow Luther, and actually to go beyond him at times in some of his explorations.

The final short section in *C.D.* is headed 'The Image of Christ'. Here Bonhoeffer refers for the first time to what he later terms "Conformation":

> We cannot transform ourselves into His Image; it is rather the form of Christ which seeks to be formed in us (Gal. 4:19) and to be manifested in us. [87]

It is 'through the Church', which is (in the first place) Christ's Image, that

> her members have been refashioned in His Image too.

For Christ

> continues to live in the lives of His followers. [88]

Here also, for the first time, Bonhoeffer asserts that in relationship with Christ: 'we recover our true humanity'. This is important for the Christian's relationship to the world, for part and parcel of true humanity is delivery from

> that individualism which is the consequence of sin

and recovery of

> our solidarity with the whole human race. [89]

The implications of this solidarity are a prominent theme of the *Ethics*.

*The Cost of Discipleship* stands as a significant part of the Bonhoeffer *corpus*. Bethge recalls that, as the author, Bonhoeffer

> made a deep impression on the Protestant Church. [90]

He also notes the protests of some of the Finkenwalde students against what they saw as Bonhoeffer's reversal of the traditional Lutheran order of Faith leading to Works. However, the longer that National Socialism remained in power the more acceptable the Bonhoeffer of *C.D.* became.

## *Spiritual Care*

## and

## *Life Together*

The work, in English entitled *Spiritual Care*, is a collection of Bonhoeffer's lecture materials on Pastoral care. As such, neither it nor the subsequent work *Life Together*, have any immediate wider social or political reference. Both are essentially works understood best in the context of the Finkenwalde community.

As in his previous works, Bonhoeffer's concern in *Spiritual Care* is with the concrete situation and the whole person. For the

> word of forgiveness is invariably a concrete word for concrete sins.

However, in practice we often fail to recognise that

> it is a whole person that God claims anew. [91]

Bonhoeffer repeatedly expresses his concern for the concrete. One confesses to another person because without them

> everything might be lost in pure reflection. [92]

In the same way, the pastor needs concretely to live in faith, lest her

> only experience is reflection on the faith. [93]

Furthermore, Bonhoeffer is concerned lest religious experience displace the concrete reality of grace, for

> We will not be saved by experiences but by grace, not even by an **experience of grace** but by grace alone. [Bonhoeffer's emphasis] [94]

*Life Together* is Bonhoeffer's reflection, written and published after its closure, on the community at Finkenwalde. The book begins with a discussion of community, before passing on to discuss the corporate life and the individual life: 'The Day Together' and 'The Day Alone'. The book concludes with chapters on 'Ministry' and on 'Confession', the latter (like community life itself) culminating in the Eucharist.

For Bonhoeffer, Christian community is a gift of Jesus Christ. For

> Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. [95]

The Christian needs others because **in** others we meet the word of Christ. Conversely, the Christian can come **to** others only **through** Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, Christian community is not a human "ideal", but rather a Divine "reality". Therefore, we enter our common life as recipients, not with an ideal to realize but with a God-given reality in which to participate.

In his discussion of Scripture, Bonhoeffer places the Christian community in the wider context of the world. God is not the 'spectator and sharer' of our life, but rather

> we are the reverent listeners *and participants in God's* action in the sacred story, the history of the Christ on earth.

Thus only insofar

> as we are **there** [ie participants in Christ's life here and now], is God with us today also. [96]

God stands, in Christ, in the midst of the world and His People participate in His life, similarly in the midst of the world. The implications of this view will unfold throughout Bonhoeffer's later work.

For the Christian, the brother is

> a physical sign of the gracious presence of the triune God. [97]

Indeed, the brother is seen as God's agent. Thus

> God will be constantly crossing our paths and cancelling our plans by sending us people with claims and petitions. [98]

If we pass them by we pass by visible signs of the Cross, showing us that not our will but God's must be done.

However, the brother is to be loved for his own sake. In his discussion of Galatians 6:2 ['Bear one another's burdens, and

so you will fulfill the law of Christ'], Bonhoeffer claims that it is only when the other person is a burden that he is truly a brother and

> not merely an object to be manipulated.

For to bear the burden of another is to

> accept and affirm [his/her] created reality. [99]

This recognition of the other person is illustrated in Bonhoeffer's admission of reticence at speaking of Christ 'even in the presence of a brother !' For

> Who is entitled to accost and confront his neighbour and talk to him about ultimate matters ? [100]

The same reticence is observed in various instances related in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, and of this overall attitude Clifford Green writes.

> Respect for reticence was deeply imbedded in [Bonhoeffer's] character. [101]

Bonhoeffer's admission here is important because it prevents us from isolating his later reluctance to speak of Christ to his fellow prisoners, as related in *L.P.P.*, as part of some "atheistic" development of his final years. Rather, we are faced first and foremost with a foundational aspect of Bonhoeffer's personality and upbringing.

At the beginning of the chapter entitled 'The Day Alone', Bonhoeffer presents the following warning:

> Let him who cannot be alone beware of community. [102]

However, the reverse is also true, and so Bonhoeffer warns:

> Let him who is not in community beware of being alone. [103]

It is of the utmost importance that community not be seen as a substitute for individuality. Rather, community should serve further to enable the individuals within it to stand alone, for the community exists as a source of strength to those within it.. Thus Bonhoeffer writes, under the heading 'The Test of Meditation':

> Has the fellowship served to make the individual free, strong, and mature, or has it made him weak and dependent ? has it taken him by the hand for a while in order that he may learn again to walk by himself, or has it made him uneasy and unsure ? [104]

Although he does not use the word, Bonhoeffer's concern here is with Christian maturity. A similar concern emerges in his discussion of Authority later in the book. There Bonhoeffer writes of a

> hankering for false authority... [having] at its root a desire to re-establish some sort of immediacy, a dependence upon human beings in the Church [as opposed to the Word of God]. [105]

This concern emerges again in the *L.P.P.*, where Bonhoeffer speaks of what he calls "Mature Christian Worldliness" and "Religionless Christianity". In the light of the discussions in *Life Together* these later concepts can be seen as essentially in continuity with

Bonhoeffer's earlier thought. Furthermore, the time in prison proved his own capacity to survive his own "Test of Meditation".

God's call, claims Bonhoeffer, comes to us in the needs of our neighbour. This claim opens the door to his later involvement in the anti-Hitler conspiracy, for to pass by Germany's need would be to pass by the call of God himself. But Bonhoeffer has opened the door even wider, because he has claimed that it is only as we participate in Christ's life here and now that we can say God is with us. Where is Christ here and now ? Nowhere for Bonhoeffer if not in the midst of Nazi-dominated Germany.

And so the Christian becomes a Contemporary. Christ is met in the messiness and confusion of the World. It is precisely his commitment to follow Jesus Christ in Discipleship which leads Bonhoeffer to his subsequent conspiratorial involvement. Christ is not left behind, but rather leads His follower further into His world. In Bethge's words:

> At the beginning of 1939 Bonhoeffer the Theologian and Christian was entering fully into his contemporary world, his place, and his time. [106]

There is much in Bonhoeffer's work up to this point which prepares us for his subsequent involvement. There is his passionate concern for the concrete, his commitment to a Theology of the Cross, and his concern to follow wherever truth [ie Christ] led.

Bethge notes that even *C.D.* leaves the door open when it is stated that:

> It is important that Jesus gives his blessing not merely to suffering incurred directly for the confession of His name, but to suffering in any just cause. [107]

*Life Together* also prepares us as it relates Bonhoeffer's increasing awareness (with Luther) that the Christian brother, and indeed the neighbour, is in fact an agent of God. And so it is as a Disciple of Jesus Christ that Bonhoeffer the Christian becomes also the Contemporary.

# Contemporary

## *Ethics*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* was written between 1940 and 1943, and remains unfinished. There have been two published arrangements of the extant material, and for the new critical German edition of Bonhoeffer's Works a third has been prepared. [108]

For this new edition of the *Ethics*, the material has been allocated to five 'working periods'. Within each of these five sections it has been decided not to refer to 'chapters' but most probably to 'manuscripts' instead, for what we have of Bonhoeffer's work here is far from complete. The detailed reconstruction of the *Ethics* appears as an Appendix.

However we reconstruct the order of composition of the *Ethics*, the fact remains (as Clifford Green has pointed out [109]) that it is not necessarily self-evident that we should read the *Ethics* in this same order. The question remains as to the order in which Bonhoeffer would have presented, and wished us to read, his material. What is more important for this study are the four 'Approaches' to which Bethge refers in the Preface to the Sixth German Edition [110]. These 'theological starting points', Bethge suggests, are:

| | |
|---|---|
| **Discipleship** | *Love of God & Decay of the World* |
| | *Church and World* |
| **Conformation** | *Ethics as Formation* |
| **Justification** | *Last Things & Things Before the Last* |
| | *Christ, Reality, and Good* |
| **Incarnation** | *History and Good* |

Plus: *The Ethical & the Christian as a Theme*

There is both continuity and discontinuity within the *Ethics* itself, and between it and Bonhoeffer's earlier works. Paul Lehman, for example, indicates the continuity when he describes the *Ethics* as

> an ethics of discipleship. '[1]

Yet there are also apparent contradictions between *Cost of Discipleship* and the *Ethics*. For example, in the *Ethics*, under the heading 'The Right To Bodily Life', Bonhoeffer writes that

> The first right of natural life consists in the safeguarding of the life of the body against arbitrary killing. '[2]

Thus the mature Bonhoeffer condones

> the killing of the enemy in war [for] he must share in bearing the consequences of the collective guilt.

Similarly, he condones the

> killing of a criminal who has done injury to the life of another. [113]

Although Bonhoeffer is not unambiguous in his position here it would appear to be at variance with the thrust of the earlier work where he writes:

> The followers of Jesus for His sake renounce every personal right... The right way to requite evil, according to Jesus, is not to resist it... The only way to overcome evil is to let it run itself to a standstill because it does not find the resistance it is looking for. [114]

In broader terms, there is in the *Ethics* a shift from the Church as stage to the world as stage. Furthermore, the *Ethics* expands upon the culmination of *C.D.*, where Bonhoeffer speaks for the first time of 'Conformation'.

Within the various writings which make up the *Ethics*, Larry Rasmussen has traced two motifs 'Ethics as Formation' and 'Ethics as Command'. The first of these is more original and more enduring, yet together they epitomise the tension throughout Bonhoeffer's writings between the taking form of Christ in the individual, and the individual's obedience to the command of Christ. Ultimately the tension is between Intrinsic and Extrinsic motivation, between grace and the possibility of claiming human achievement. This tension is finally resolved in favour of the former, as it was also for Luther in his preference for the concept of 'Imitatio'. The

tension is also manifested in the shift in focus between *C.D.* and the *Ethics* from Obedience to Freedom:

> Bonhoeffer certainly does not drop obedience as a key term for Christian ethics, but now he always adds "and freedom" when speaking of obedience... he now speaks of a real tension between obedience and freedom. [115]

Bonhoeffer's new emphasis on freedom in the *Ethics* is perhaps best summed up in de Gruchy's phrase 'The Life of Free Responsibility' [116]. This, for Bonhoeffer, is an appropriate description of the truly Christian, truly human life.

Mindful of the many difficulties in discerning a chronological order for the *Ethics*, and also of the point that such an order may still not give clear indication of Bonhoeffer's intended arrangement of his work, the approach to the *Ethics* adopted in this study will be thematic, focusing on a number of themes from the work.

**Identification**

A first important theme of the *Ethics* is the Divine identification with humanity in Jesus Christ. Whilst we are seeking to grow out of our humanity, 'to leave the man behind us', Bonhoeffer writes,

> God becomes man and [so] we have to recognise that God wishes us men, too, to be real men.

For God loves humanity as it is, and not as an ideal. Therefore:

> What we find abominable in man's opposition to God, what we shrink back from with pain and hostility, the real man, the real world, this is for God the ground for unfathomable love, and it is with this that He unites Himself utterly. [117]

God's love for all humankind cuts across all human classifications and judgments. And so, Bonhoeffer asserts, because God has identified Himself with humankind [as example and as the one who enables us to be truly human], we can

> live as real men and... love the real man at our side. [118]

It is not a question of applying Christ's teaching as if it were our task to shape the world in accordance with Christian principles. Rather, it is the gift of Christ that we are formed into his likeness

> being drawn into the form of Jesus Christ. [119]

Thus

> the form of Jesus Christ takes form in man.

And this formation of man into Christ's form is accomplished by God

> so that man may become, not indeed God, but, in the eyes of God, man. [120]

For

> to be conformed with the Incarnate - that is to be a real man. [121]

The Church is therefore

> Christ Himself who has taken form among men... a section of humanity in which Christ has really taken form.

Indeed, the 'true form' of all humanity is that of Jesus Christ, a form

> which is its own by right, which it has already received, but which it merely fails to understand and accept. [122]

An ethics built upon Formation is a concrete ethics. For the question posed by such an ethic does not concern abstract principles but

> the way in which Christ takes form among us here and now. [123]

The task of ethics, therefore, is to speak specifically and concretely

> about the way in which the form of Jesus Christ takes form in our world...
> [Thus] the discussion must be neither abstract nor casuistic, but entirely concrete... concrete judgments and decisions will have to be ventured here.
> [For] here... are concrete commandments and instructions for which obedience is demanded. [124]

The section ends with a discussion of 'Guilt, Justification and Renewal'. Here Bonhoeffer asserts that the Church

> is precisely that community of human beings which has been led by the grace of Christ to the recognition of guilt toward Christ. [125]

The Church calls all people

> into the fellowship of the confession of guilt

yet also to the forgiveness of Jesus Christ. [126] Bonhoeffer is clearly convinced of the Church's guilt, particularly in face of the

rise of Nazism, yet however much it has failed to allow the form of Christ to emerge in it, there is the possibility of forgiveness - of "Justification and Renewal". And this possibility extends even to the wider world as the Church

> is given room to do her work among the nations. [127]

Thus far Bonhoeffer has presented the positive aspect of ethics. It is concerned with the taking form of Christ in men and women, and hence with their coming to full humanity. But in many concrete ways both the Church and the world are in fact guilty of

> defection from Christ, from the form which was ready to take form in us and to lead us to our own true form. [128]

Hence our need for Divine justification and renewal.

**Justification**

A second important theme is the Reformation concept of the 'justifcation of the sinner by grace alone.' [129] In true Reformation tradition, Bonhoeffer emphasises that justification is extrinsic to the believer and is imputed to her:

> my life is justified solely by that which is the property of Christ and never by that which has become my own property. [130]

Furthermore, justification means

> being wrested from my imprisonment in my own self... [and] set free by Jesus Christ. [131]

Such freedom is (following Luther) freedom for God and the neighbour as the believer

> becomes aware that there is a God who loves him; that a brother is standing at his side, whom God loves as he loves him himself... [132]

Thus the Christian is freed by Christ to act in the world, trusting not in her right actions but in Christ. For justification is God's final word -

> never the natural or necessary end of the way which has been pursued so far, but...rather the total condemnation and invalidation of this way. [133]

Bonhoeffer continues by discussing what he terms 'The Penultimate'. The Penultimate is all that precedes the Ultimate. Of this concept, John de Gruchy writes:

> True to his Lutheran heritage, Bonhoeffer continued to affirm justification by faith as the final and ultimate word about our relationship to God. But the ultimate is nonetheless integrally related to penultimate concerns. The struggle for humanity and justice, typical of the "good, secular men" Bonhoeffer knew in the conspiracy, had to become the struggle of the Church. [134]

For Bonhoeffer, the Penultimate was of such importance that he could make the claim that

> For the sake of the ultimate the **penultimate must be preserved**. [135] [emphasis mine]

Through his concept of the Penultimate, Bonhoeffer is concerned to affirm (in the face of a Lutheran tradition of non-

involvement) that it **does** matter whether or not the Church is involved in the life of humanity and in the social and political issues of the day, for such involvement prepares the way for the Ultimate. Furthermore, on a personal level, through his concept of the Penultimate Bonhoeffer opens the door to relate to Christ his family and the colleagues with whom he was newly in solidarity through the conspiracy. Thus he writes of 'humanity and goodness' that they

> should not acquire a value on their own account, but they should and shall be claimed for Jesus christ, especially in cases where they persist as the unconscious residue of a former attachment to the ultimate. [136]

And so the relationship between the Church and the world is redefined in terms of chronology. As Bonhoeffer stated in the previous section, the world has 'already received' its true form, but as yet it 'fails to understand and accept it.' [137]

The section closes with discussion of specific issues. Here Bonhoeffer discusses the 'Ethics of Life', and speaks of the permissibility of taking life where there is

> an unconditional necessity

to do so. [138] Here are issues of the Penultimate, discussed in the freedom made possible by the promised justification of the Ultimate.

A second section ('Christ, Reality & Good') reveals further Bonhoeffer's views on the relationship between God and the world. Traditional Lutheranism thinks 'in terms of two spheres', yet

this was not Luther's intention. For he sought to overturn the dualism of Medieval Theology, yet in the process

> fell victim...to the very dualism which he was attempting to overthrow. [139]

In rejecting the Medieval dualism of Natural / Supernatural, and the resulting dual standard of "Natural" ethic or "Evangelical Counsel", Luther had created a dualism of both / and, of citizen and Christian - yet a dualism nevertheless.

Bonhoeffer, by contrast, seeks to affirm that there are in fact not two spheres but one:

> In Christ we are offered the possibility of partaking in the reality of God and in the reality of the world, but not in the one without the other... [140]
> There are not two realities, but only one reality, and that is the reality of God, which has become manifest in Christ in the reality of the world. [141]

Although God and world are not to be identifed with one another, they are united in Christ. They are not two spheres, but one. Therefore, Bonhoeffer asserts of the Christian that

> His worldliness does not divide him from Christ, and his Christianity does not divide him from the world. Belonging wholly to Christ, he stands at the same time wholly in the world... [142]

In these two sections of the *Ethics* centred on the concept of Justification, Bonhoeffer has stressed the freedom of the Christian. The Christian is free to act in the world, for here in the world he meets Jesus Christ. Furthermore, he is free to take the

risk of acting in the world (as Bonhoeffer himself did in the conspiracy) because of God's gracious justification of the sinner in Jesus Christ.

**Incarnation**

A third important theme of the *Ethics* is that of Incarnation. As under the heading of 'Justification', Bonhoeffer's focus was on the Christian as Free, here his focus is on the Christian as Servant. [143] He is also concerned here to maintain his own emphasis on the unity of God and the world. And so he writes:

> In Jesus Christ God and man become one... through him in the actions of Christians "secular" and "Christian" become one also. [144]

Therefore

> [The] word of God which is addressed to us in Jesus Christ... is addressed to our entire life [and], the response, too, can only be an entire one. [145]

Bonhoeffer concludes from this that

> Responsibility means, therefore, that the totality of life is pledged and that our action becomes a matter of life and death. [146]

Bonhoeffer now passes on to a consideration of the 'Structure of Responsible Life'. Firstly, he writes of what he calls 'Deputyship'. 'Deputyship' is responsibility in action. Jesus 'lived in deputyship for us' as the Incarnate One, and as such was

'the responsible person *par excellence.*' For us as His disciples, Deputyship is

> the complete surrender of **one's own life** to the other man. [147] [emphasis mine]

Secondly, it is important to note that in this view of Deputyship, the responsible person

> is dependent on the man who is concretely his neighbour in his concrete possibility. [148]

Bonhoeffer's is not an ethics of principle established in advance and applied to each situation, for there is no principle

> which possesses absolute validity... [Indeed] the "absolute good" may sometimes be the very worst. [149]

Rather, Bonhoeffer's ethic seeks to be grounded in the reality of Christ and of the world, for only action

> in accordance with Christ [is] in accordance with reality. [150]

This means that responsible action is truly human action, ultimately ignorant as to its own goodness. An ethic of principle justifies an action in advance. A responsible person, by contrast

> commits his action into the hands of God and lives by God's grace and favor. [151]

It is precisely in its focus upon the concrete situation that Bonhoeffer finds the certainty of an ethic of responsible action. For such an ethic turns the individual from

absorption in themselves to service of their neighbour, from concern for their own moral purity to responsibility toward the neighbour.

Thirdly, an ethic of responsibility inevitably requires an 'acceptance of guilt'. Jesus, in his reponsible action on behalf of humankind, incurred its guilt. And so on the basis of the Cross, Bonhoeffer can claim:

> Through Jesus Christ it becomes an essential part of responsible action that the man who is without sin loves selflessly and for that reason incurs guilt. [152]

Therefore

> if it is responsible action... concerned solely and entirely with the other man, if it arises from selfless love for the real man who is our brother, then, precisely because this is so, it cannot wish to shun the fellowship of human guilt. [153]

Fourthly, Bonhoeffer considers the status of conscience. Again, there can be no refuge in the moral purity of absolute principles. One is rather to be a responsible person for

> it is precisely in the responsible acceptance of guilt that a conscience which is bound solely to Christ will best prove its innocence. [154]

Hence the description of the responsible person as 'justified by necessity' before others; 'acquitted by conscience' before herself; hoping 'only for mercy' before God. [155] For Bonhoeffer, the same Lord of the conscience is also 'essence' and 'goal' of concrete responsibility, and for this reason there can be no final contradiction between the demands of conscience and of responsibility.

Ultimately, responsible action is a 'free venture', making no claim to ultimate knowledge of good and evil, but simply having chosen the relatively better course of action in the given situation. [156]

A fifth area of discussion is that of 'Vocation'. As might be expected, Bonhoeffer is here concerned to present vocation as the response of the whole person to the whole of life. He writes of the 'two disastrous misunderstandings' of vocation [the Monastic, and the Protestant - specifically Lutheran], that they limit the scope of responsibility. [157] For Bonhoeffer, responsibility is such that any attempt to limit its scope

> takes refuge from the free open space of responsibility in the comforting confinement of the fulfilment of duty. [158]

This entire section of the *Ethics* has sought to explore the implications for ethics of the unity of God and the world. Here is an ethics which seeks to move away from all dualism and to affirm an ultimate unity. The key concept here is the Incarnation, in which God and humanity are united in Christ. To follow Christ in Discipleship means to follow him into the world, with him to incur guilt out of love for our neighbour, and ultimately to trust only in God for our justification.

**The Self Evident**

A fourth important theme of the *Ethics* is summed up by the term 'The Self Evident'. In the section of the *Ethics* headed 'The "Ethical" & The "Christian" As A Theme', Bonhoeffer states that he considers such a description to be 'extremely questionable', for the ethical

> is not essentially a formal rational principle but [rather] a concrete relation between the giver and receiver of commands.' [159]

There is no room even for human interpretation or application, for this would bring human reflection into the situation such that

> precisely at the crucial juncture the decisive factor would no longer be the commandment [of God]. [160]

Because God is to be encountered in the midst of life, there are many situations where ethical reflection is unnecessary, for

> Ethics and ethicists do not intervene continuously in life. [161]

Rather, times when the ethical becomes a 'theme for discussion' must be followed by

> times when the moral course goes without saying. [162]

This is the logical outcome of all that Bonhoeffer has written thus far. This is the point to which his Discipleship has taken him - where Christ is truly met in the day to day reality of

life. At this point Bonhoeffer returns to his concept of the 'Mandates'. These are four 'definite, historical form[s]' in which the commandment of God is made known. [163] These forms are identified as 'Church', 'Family', 'Labor' [later without explanation replaced by 'Culture'], and 'Government'. Through the Mandates humankind lives in the Commandment of God

> without always being conscious of it. [164]

For it is in the free participation of men and women in the Mandates that Jesus Christ is concretely obeyed:

> Jesus Christ's claim to lordship, which is proclaimed by the Church, means at the same time the emancipation of family, culture and government for the realization of their own essential character which has its foundation in Christ. [165]

In the Mandates we have an interpretation of the traditional Lutheran concept of 'Orders of Creation'. But here, as before in his concept of 'Orders of Preservation', Bonhoeffer roots the Mandates in Christ. The Augsburg Confession is essentially dualistic when it states that

> Christians may without sin

fulfil secular callings. [166] Bonhoeffer, by contrast, holds to no such dualistic division of roles into Sacred and Secular. For him, the Mandates unite sacred and secular as the whole person serves the one Christ in all of life.

**The Natural**

A fifth theme important to the *Ethics* is that of 'The Natural'. The concept of The Natural has an important place in any consideration of the work and it is appropriate that it be discussed at some length.

The first reference to the Natural is in the manuscript entitled 'The Last Things & The Things Before The Last'. The abandonment of the 'concept of the natural' by Protestant ethics, is, claims Bonhoeffer, a serious loss. [167] For Protestant thought is

> now more or less deprived of the means of orientation in dealing with the practical questions of natural life. [168]

This means that the Protestant church is unable to give a

> clear word of direction in answer to the burning questions of natural life... [leaving] countless human beings unanswered and unassisted in the midst of vitally important decisions. [169]

Bonhoeffer's concern, therefore, is for a recovery of the concept of the natural

> on the basis of the Gospel.

For without such a concept there are

> no longer any relative distinctions to be made within the fallen creation. [170]

And it is precisely because of this loss of the concept of the Natural that even the Confessing Church can show very little concern for the state of affairs unfolding around it in Nazi Germany. Bonhoeffer, therefore, seeks to address this situation with his concept of the 'Penultimate', and later with his acceptance of a form of Natural Law in the 'Divine Mandates'. The recovery of the Natural in Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* is his response to a situation in which he increasingly found himself at odds with the Church on the permissibility of speaking to the political realities of the day. Faced with such realities, and finding that the common ground between Church and world appeared to be virtually nonexistent, Bonhoeffer sought a course of action which would again enable the form of Christ to manifest itself in the world. And so he embarked on a venture of responsibility, a venture of which Robin Lovin writes:

> It is a commitment to restructure the situation so that the laws inherent in the divine mandates can once again be effective... Bonhoeffer's aim is to bring back a pattern of authority that allowed an uncomplicated obedience and asked only a measured loyalty, a pattern that wartime deceit and Nazi demands for total obedience had destroyed. [171]

For it is imperative that

> Christ must begin to take form again in the structures of human life. [172]

The venture of responsibility, therefore, is made in the Borderline Situation where the Mandates cannot help, or, alternatively, in a situation such as Nazi Germany, where the natural is no longer

> a truly reliable guide to action. [173]

Thus in the Borderline Situation the responsible act is an exception to the rule, whilst in the latter it is the only action possible. However, Bonhoeffer is careful to point out that the mandates are the norm for ethical decision-making. As Lovin points out:

> To approach every situation in life as though it called for a venture of responsibility would be to ignore the obligations that the persistent divine mandates impose on us. [174]

And in Bonhoeffer's own words:

> The commandment of God is not to be found anywhere and everywhere... It is to be found only where there are the divine mandates which are founded upon the revelation of Christ. Such mandates are the Church, marriage and the family, culture and government. [175]

As we survey the *Ethics* in its entirety we can see that Bonhoeffer's concern for concrete reality led him to the concept of The Natural. Early on in his work for the *Ethics* he came to see that because the Protestant Church had abandoned any concept of Natural Law it no longer shared any common ground with the world on which to challenge such evils as Nazism. Nor did it possess the will to do so, for it regarded the area of politics as peripheral to its major concerns. This renewal of concern with the natural led in turn to the concepts of the 'Penultimate' and later of the 'Mandates'. And so eventually Bonhoeffer came to see that much of Christian Ethics is in fact self-evident, yet that his own course was to be a 'venture of responsibility' that Christ might again take form in the Mandates and thus God's Will again be discernible from the basic structures of society.

What we have of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* is, of course, incomplete. But we are left with a clear sense of his passionate concern, throughout his developing thought, to relate Christ and the world. Through the **Identification** of Christ with all humanity, men and women are invited to allow Him to take form in them, and thus to become fully human. Through the **Justification** of the sinner by grace alone, the individual is set free to act in the midst of the moral uncertainty of the world, where Christ indeed is to be found. Through the **Incarnation**, Christ gave His life for others. So too are His followers to give themselves to responsible action for the sake of their neighbours, even where this appears to, cut across abstract principle. Finally, Bonhoeffer comes to the logical conclusion of his thought thus far. If Christ is to be found in the midst of the world, in its people and social structures, then much of ethics is actually **Self Evident**, and the concept of 'The Natural' is of renewed importance. This in turn prepares the way for much of the thought of the Prison Writings, where Bonhoeffer's work sadly terminates.

## The Prison Writings: *Fiction From Prison*

## *Letters and Papers*

Despite his imprisonment, Bonhoeffer did not cease to write. Although he completed no further works for publication, he continued to write throughout his time in Tegel. What we have in the collections discussed in this section are essentially private writings, intended either as personal therapy [*F.F.P.*], or as notes on work in progress, or simply as personal correspondence with friends and family [*L.P.P.*]. [176] Yet these fragmentary writings are important contributions to our understanding of both the man himself and his thought during the months of imprisonment. Without them our understanding of Dietrich Bonhoeffer would be substantially less complete.

It is important, however, not to read the Prison Writings in isolation. Some have claimed to see in the *L.P.P.* a Theology and Spirituality very different to that of the earlier works. Yet Bonhoeffer himself writes, in a letter to Eberhard Bethge of April 1944, that:

> I don't think I've ever changed much, except perhaps at the time of my first impressions abroad and under the first conscious influence of father's personality. [177]

And on reading the *L.P.P.*, one finds much that is essentially in continuity with the earlier works, as this study is concerned to show.

The months in Tegel were a lonely time for Bonhoeffer, yet he was aware of a sense of community which transcended the walls of the prison. In a letter to his family, he observes

> how closely our own lives are bound up with other people's, and in fact... how little we are separate entities. [178]

Furthermore, although he regarded himself as unable to contribute 'useful service somewhere', other than from the prison cell, Bonhoeffer was aware that what he could do

> makes its contribution in the unseen world, a sphere where the word "do" is quite unsuitable. [179]

And it is certainly no small contribution that Dietrich Bonhoeffer has made to the Church through his Prison Writings.

In his Introduction to the English Edition of *F.F.P.*, Clifford Green points to the past and future orientations of Bonhoeffer's prison writings:

> The first year is orientated chiefly to the past, to his family background and earlier experiences of childhood and youth; the second year is orientated chiefly to the future, to the new theology of "religionless Christianity" and his hopes for a new church which would serve the coming generations in a new society after the war. [180]

Thus the first year of Bonhoeffer's imprisonment was primarily concerned with his attempts at fiction, as he sought to come to terms with his present and to relive his past. Then, during the second year, his attention turned to the future, and to what it would mean

for a post-war generation to believe in God. Yet both concerns are interconnected - for it was the man whose background is painted for us in the *F.F.P.* who set himself the task of setting the agenda for "religionless Christianity". And so, before passing on to discussion of the *L.P.P.*, is is important to consider, albeit briefly, the *Fiction From Prison*.

### *Fiction From Prison*

Bonhoeffer himself refers to his 'bold enterprise' in a letter to Eberhard Bethge of November 1943. He writes:

> Then I started on a bold enterprise that I've had in mind for a long time: I began to write the story of a contemporary middle-class family. The background for this consisted of all our innumerable conversations on the subject, and my own personal experiences; in short, it was to present afresh middle-class life as we know it in our own families and especially in the light of Christianity... the work is giving me great pleasure. [181]

Earlier, in a letter to his parents, Bonhoeffer had mentioned his abortive attempt to write a play, and his decision to rewrite it as a story. He continued:

> It's about the life of a family, and of course there is a great deal of autobiography mixed up in it. [182]

In their own Introduction to the *F.F.P.*, the Bethge's suggest that Bonhoeffer worked on the Drama during the Spring and early Summer of 1943, and then moved on to the Novel during the Summer and Winter of the same year. They cite as evidence the two

references in the letters [quoted above], and also the types of paper used, from which it is possible to match an undated manuscript with a dated letter and thus ascertain the likely date of the m.s.

A fascination with Death is nothing new to Bonhoeffer. Even in his childhood he would imagine what it must be like to be dead [see Biographical section]. And so it is no surprise to see the theme of Death quite prominent in the *Fiction.* Ruth Zerner, in her Commentary on the *F.F.P.*, cites scientist-philosopher Carl Friederich von Weizsacker, who sees in the prison writings

> the hallmark of the work of a person's last years, the approach of death opening his eyes to see things... [193]

Zerner herself suggests that Bonhoeffer's theological insights were due not only to his sense of impending death, but were also

> linked to the self-knowledge gained by his long, liberating look backward to his early life via the fictional regression of the drama and the novel. [194]

Indeed, Zerner suggests that the primary themes of the two works reflect the two most likely outcomes for the imprisoned Theologian - death through execution or Allied bombing, or marriage to Maria von Wedemeyer. Thus the play is dominated by the imminence of death, and the novel by Bonhoeffer's own social and cultural world; the concern with social class in the latter being particularly relevant to Bonhoeffer's own engagement to the upper class Maria von Wedemeyer as well as to his specifically theological thinking on the problem of class divisions. [195]

The play begins with a Grandmother telling a young child a story about a hunter, which ends with his firing a shot at an animal he had hunted for some days. The child asks why the animal did not run away. The Grandmother suggests a number of answers:

> ...perhaps this wonderful animal knew its hunter and realised it couldn't escape him. ... Perhaps it knew that its death was close and yet did not fear it. Who knows, child ?

Further on in the same conversation, the Grandmother speaks of death as it faces human beings:

> They know they have to die, but most forget about it for the greater part of their lives. Some don't forget it, and one notices that about them. And then there are a very few who sense when death will come to them. They see it coming. They are quite different from other people. [186]

Zerner thus suggests that

> in his prison play Bonhoeffer had prepared for and actually rehearsed his death...

For the words of the Grandmother in the play as she finishes reading are strongly reminiscent of Bonhoeffer's own words on the day prior to his execution. As the Grandmother closes the book she comments to the listening child:

> The end of the story is not in the book. But it most certainly continues; as a matter of fact, it really begins at this point. [187]

And of course, Bonhoeffer's own words as he took his leave from Payne Best and the others carry the same message:

> This is the end - for me the beginning of life. [188]

In the Grandmother's story, therefore

> We may assume that God is the hunter and that Bonhoeffer is the creature. [189]

The entire play is concerned with Death, and it is appropriate that such should be the theme of a work of fiction preoccupied with its author's past, for such was a constant fascination of the child Dietrich. Yet the play has other concerns too, not least that preoccupation with social class which it shares with the novel. There is some debate as to how much Bonhoeffer really managed to transcend the limitations and prejudices of his class. This question is dealt with in more detail elsewhere [see the Biographical section]. However, the discussions in the novel between the two teenage characters - Christoph and Ulrich - illustrate Bonhoeffer's own awareness of the conflict between the Christian imperative of inclusiveness and his own instincts towards elitism. This tension is never resolved.

Another important theme of the novel is that of 'unconscious Christianity'. Ultimately, this theme cannot be separated from that of social class, for as Zerner comments, 'middle-class values' and 'Christian ethics' are closely connected in Bonhoeffer's mind. [190] The term 'unconscious Christianity' occurs only once in the novel fragment, as young Ulrich responds to the question posed by his friend Christoph [based on Bonhoeffer himself]. Christoph observes of his parents that

> One probably can't call them Christians, at least not in the usual sense of the word. They don't go to Church.

Yet there is a sense in which their values are those which might be expected of Christian men and women. This is the problem. Ulrich's reply is revealing:

> That is because, without knowing, and at any rate without saying so, in reality they still live in Christianity - an unconscious Christianity. [191]

Although there are references to 'unconscious Christianity' in the *L.P.P.*, these are only passing references and give little further insight into Bonhoeffer's thought on this subject. [192] The intention of such a concept, however, is clear from the novel itself - it was in order that Bonhoeffer could include his family (and possibly other associates in the conspiracy) in his own Christian allegiance, and also explain the convergence of his own faith commitment with their humanism. And so Bonhoeffer finally finds community with his family and other associates in a non-religious life of responsiblity outside the Church.

Finally, mention must be made of two characters in the *Fiction*, both of whom Zerner sees as particularly important to Bonhoeffer's own Theological work. Heinrich is a dockworker who chooses to live on in the slums because, as he says

> Suddenly I met God in the midst of Hell. [193]

Professing no traditional religious piety, nor attending Church, Zerner sees Heinrich as displaying something of what it means to be a

religionless Christian. Furthermore, she recalls Bonhoeffer's own words in a letter of July 1944:

> It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life. [194]

Frau Brake is a character in the novel who clearly reflects Bonhoeffer's own discontent

> with aspects of the *status quo*, especially in the church. [195]

Her comments on the sermon which she has just heard, and on the state of the Church in general, echo Bonhoeffer's own concerns from *The Cost of Discipleship* onwards. Her passionately held views on the Church and its message serve to link the Bonhoeffer of *The Cost of Discipleship* with the visionary of the *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

The *Fiction From Prison* is a significant contribution in its own right to our overall picture of the imprisoned Theologian, yet is also useful as an introduction to some of the theological themes which were to preoccupy Bonhoeffer in the *Letters and Papers*.

## *Letters and Papers from Prison*

The most pressing problem confronting any study of the *Letters & Papers* is the form in which they come to us. The material collected in the *L.P.P.* was never intended for a wider readership than its immediate recipients (generally Bethge or the family), and should be read mindful of the fact that it does not therefore come to us with the authority of a manuscript completed for publication. Hence the importance of reading it in the light of all that has gone before, for we cannot be certain as to exactly what Bonhoeffer would have written had he completed his projected work. Because of the form in which the prison writings come to us, this study will use the 'Outline for a Book' in order to provide a framework for considering some of the major themes of *L.P.P.*

The 'Outline for a Book' is dated July/August 1944. The finished work was intended to be a book of no more than 100 pages, divided into three Chapters, namely: 'A Stocktaking of Christianity'; 'The Real Meaning of Christian Faith'; and 'Conclusions'. It is likely that the work would have been entitled *The Essence of Christianity.* The Outline sets out the projected content of each Chapter.

'A Stocktaking of Christianity'

The Book was to open with a discussion of the 'coming of age' of the world. [196] Elsewhere in the *L.P.P.*, Bonhoeffer traces

back to the thirteenth century a movement towards what he refers to as human autonomy, whereby 'God' has been forced more and more from the centre of life to its peripheries. For humanity is able to get along perfectly well without the 'working hypothesis' of God. [197] In his Outline, Bonhoeffer expresses his concern that as a result

> Man is again thrown back on himself. [198]

Here is sin in its essential reality - human incurvedness. The danger of humanity's 'coming of age' is that it will lead to a complete rejection of God, and a deification of the human.

Yet there is a very real positive side to the movement towards human autonomy. Bonhoeffer moves on to discuss what he refers to as

> The religionlessness of man who has come of age.

With God forced to the peripheries of life, as a 'working hypothesis' for life He has 'become superfluous'. [199] Therefore, elsewhere in the *L.P.P.*, Bonhoeffer can claim that the 'honest' Christian will

> recognise that we have to live in the world *etsi deus non daretur* ['as though God were not given'] [200]

For the Christian, the 'coming of age' of humanity leads to a profound and radical conclusion concerning God. As Bonhoeffer writes:

> our coming of age leads us to a true recognition of our situation before God. God would have us live as men who manage our lives without Him. [201]

For Bonhoeffer, as for Barth, 'religion' is a negative concept, its individualism enabling human beings to escape their responsibility for the world. John de Gruchy writes of Bonhoeffer's concern that the attempt of religion

> to provide a schematic and secure answer to the search for salvation enabled men and women to avoid the direct challenge of the gospel. [202]

Therefore, it would appear that Discipleship, as defined throughout Bonhoeffer's work, is a profoundly non-religious concept.

Throughout his time in prison Bonhoeffer became increasingly interested in the Old Testament, claiming that his

> thoughts and feelings seem to be getting more and more like those of the Old Testament... [203]

Later in the same letter, Bonhoeffer appears to question the false security of religion when he observes that

> we live in the last but one and believe the last, don't we ?

He then goes on to ask the question why the norms of conduct seem so different in the O.T. as compared with the N.T. After all

> it is one and the same God.

Indeed, he continues

> In my opinion it is not Christian to want to take our thoughts and feelings too quickly and too directly from the New Testament. [204]

It is clear that this discussion is motivated at least in part by Bonhoeffer's involvement with the conspiracy against Hitler. For this was a course of action which eschewed the security of religious certainty, yet was at the same time profoundly Christian. Living, as we do, in the 'Last but One', Bonhoeffer is concerned that we do indeed live in it and not take refuge in the certainties of religion's 'Last Word'. The discussion in the *Ethics* on the Ultimate and Penultimate comes readily to mind here.

Expressed in more concrete terms, Bonhoeffer is concerned that we

> find and love God in what He actually gives us. [205]

Otherwise, it is like a man who, whilst in his wife's arms, hankers 'after the other world'. Such is clearly not God's intention. [206] Another illustration is the *cantus firmus*. In a letter of May 1944, Bonhoeffer writes of human love for God as

> a kind of *cantus firmus* to which the other melodies of life provide the counterpoint. [206]

The intention of this illustration is to show that love for God does not devalue or displace human love, for God wishes us to

> love Him eternally with our whole hearts... [but] not in such a way as to injure or weaken our earthly love. [207]

Hence the *cantus firmus* and the counterpoint remain [like God and the world] related, yet distinct.

Bonhoeffer now moves on in his 'Stocktaking' to a discussion on the Protestant Church of his time. Bonhoeffer's relationship to the Church during the last years of his life was somewhat ambivalent. He was committed to the Church, yet found his own place to be with the [avowedly secular] conspirators rather than with his fellow Christians. In prison he writes that

> It's remarkable how little I miss going to Church... [208]

And on another occasion, he observes that there are weeks when

> I don't read the Bible much. [209]

Yet Bonhoeffer continued to be engaged by the person of Christ. In another letter he revealed that the question with which he grappled in prison was the same question as had marked his theological pilgrimage from the beginning:

> What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today. [210]

For Bonhoeffer, the Church was so bound up with its own self-preservation that it was 'incapable' of speaking of Christ to the world. Words no longer had any meaning or force. Therefore, in his 'Thoughts on the Day of the Baptism of [D.W.D.] Bethge', the infant's great-uncle writes that:

> Our earlier words are... bound to lose their force and cease, and our being Christians today will be limited to two things: prayer and righteous action among men. [211]

For the time being, prayer to God and action in the world are all that remain for the Church's witness.

In his notes for this section on the Protestant Church, Bonhoeffer writes of the Confessing Church as

> Generally... standing up for the Church's "cause", but [with] little personal faith in Jesus.

He saw the Church 'on the defensive' when it should have been engaged in responsible action on behalf of others. And so it is hardly surprising that such a Church had

> no effect on the masses

for the Church has no relevance to them. [212]

Of his 'Stocktaking' Chapter, Bonhoeffer wrote in a letter to Bethge:

> Sometimes I'm quite shocked at what I say... and so I'm looking forward to getting to the more constructive part. [213]

'The Real Meaning of Christian Faith'

The first section of this second Chapter is headed 'God and the Secular'. Here is a concern which has been central to Bonhoeffer's thought throughout his life, namely, that God is to be found in the midst of the world, and hence that no division between Sacred and Secular can be permitted. Elsewhere in the *L.P.P.*

Bonhoeffer speaks of Luther as an example of a person who lived what he calls a 'this - worldly life'. Such a person lives

> unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. [214]

And for such a person

> Christ is no longer an object of religion, but something quite different, really the Lord of the world. [215]

This was also the experience of Bonhoeffer himself, living as he did in the "boundary situation" of Nazi Germany where "religion" had all but broken down. [216]

The second section is headed 'Who Is God ?'. For Bonhoeffer, the answer to this fundamental question does not arise out of an 'abstract belief in God', but rather from an 'encounter with Jesus Christ.' Faith, therefore, is not intellectual assent, but

> participation in the being of Jesus (incarnation, cross, and resurrection). [217]

For Bonhoeffer

> [Jesus'] "being there for others" is the experience of transcendence. It is only this "being there for others", maintained till death, that is the ground of his omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence.

And so

> Our relation to God is not a "religious" relationship to the highest, most powerful, and best Being imaginable - that is not authentic transcendence - but our relation to God is a new life in "existence for others", through participation in the being of Jesus. [218]

This leads us on to the third section, for which we have only the heading: 'Interpretation of Biblical Concepts on this Basis', and a brief indication that the full range of Christian Doctrine would have been involved. We do not know how Bonhoeffer would have developed this section, although in light of the preceding material we can refer back to his first published work [*Sanctorum Communio*] where he writes of

> the social intention of all the basic Christian concepts. [219]

Again, the essential continuity of Bonhoeffer's work is apparent, for here his first and last works are linked by a common concern. In the *L.P.P.*, that concern has become specific - how to reinterpret Christianity for a world come of age, the time of the religionless Christian.

A fourth section, presumably concerned with the area of Worship, has the one-word title 'Cultus', together with a short comment in parentheses:

> Details to follow later, particularly on cultus and 'religion'. [220]

Elsewhere, in a letter to Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer touches on the question which no doubt was to be posed in this section when he asks:

> What is the place of worship and prayer in a religionless situation ? Does the secret discipline... take on a new importance here ? [221]

Then, in his next letter to Bethge, Bonhoeffer observes that in face of his own, and others', criticism of "religion"

> a secret discipline must be restored whereby the *mysteries* of the Christian faith are protected against profanation. [222]

A final reference of relevance to this section is to be found in Bonhoeffer's Baptismal Thoughts, where he speaks of 'prayer and doing justice' [see above]. Larry Rasmussen uses this couplet to interpret the meaning of non-religious Worship for Bonhoeffer. He suggests that Bonhoeffer's vision means

> that worship in a world-come-of-age is not for everyone... [but rather] for small groups of clearly committed Christians... [whose] expression of the meaning of that loyalty as members of the one Body is communicated with one another in worship, but not to and with all. [223]

Finally in this Chapter, Bonhoeffer poses the question as to the content of Christian belief:

> What do we really believe ? I mean, believe in such a way that we stake our lives on it ? [224]

The question posed here does not concern what **is to be believed**, in the sense of a doctrinal standard. Nor does it concern the belief of the Church. Rather, Bonhoeffer's concern here is with what, in all honesty, is believed by individual Christians. For Christian Maturity does not mean unquestioning acceptance of the Faith of the Church, but rather a personal commitment, honestly undertaken, to Jesus Christ. The section ends by referring back to the immediately preceding material:

> Well then, what do we really believe ?

Answer: see (b)[God], (c)[Concepts], and (d)[Cultus]. [225]

Throughout his time in prison, Bonhoeffer demonstrates the depth of his own personal faith, as for example when he writes to Bethge:

> My past life is brimfull of God's goodness, and my sins are covered by the forgiving love of Christ crucified. [226]

Furthermore, in the letter accompanying his 'Outline', he writes:

> We can still pray, and it is only in the spirit of prayer that any such work can be begun and carried through. [227]

Precisely how Bonhoeffer would have tied up his preceding material in his discussion of the content of belief here we cannot know, yet we can be sure that his intention was to be thoroughly honest, both on a personal and an ecclesiastical level. For, after a brief discussion of the question of the "faith of the church", he writes:

> There may be a place for these considerations, but they do not absolve us from the duty of being honest with ourselves. [228]

'Conclusions'

What conclusions did Bonhoeffer draw for the future life and witness of the Church ?

Firstly, he writes that

> The church is the Church only when it exists for others. [229]

This is the corporate outworking of his concept of 'Responsibility'. And so the Church is to live out its message of "being there for others" by giving its property away to the needy, and the clergy similarly by existing solely on the financial contributions of their congregations. The Church, writes Bonhoeffer

> must not underestimate the importance of human example. [230]

Secondly, there is need for some revision in the area of Theology. Bonhoeffer refers to the Creeds, Christian Apologetics, Ministerial Training, and 'the pattern of ministerial life' as areas where change is necessary. [231]

The Bonhoeffer *corpus* of work ends with *Letters & Papers From Prison.* Where his Discipleship would have taken the still young Theologian beyond the prison cell we cannot know. But his life and work, despite their abrupt and tragically early end, continue to offer a rich resource for Christian thinking and acting in the world.

> The answer of the righteous person to the sufferings which the world causes her is to bless. That was the answer of God to the world which nailed Christ to the cross: blessing. God does not repay like with like, and neither should the righteous person. No condemning, no railing, but blessing. The world would have no hope if this were not so. The world lives and has its future by means of the blessing of God and of the righteous person. Blessing means laying one's hands upon something and saying: You belong to God in spite of all. It is in this way that we respond to the world which causes us such suffering. We do not forsake it, cast it out, despise or condemn it. Instead, we recall it to God, we give it hope, we lay our hands upon it and say: God's blessing come upon you; may God renew you; be blessed you dear God-created world, for you belong to your creator and

redeemer. We have received God's blessing in our happiness and in our suffering. And whoever has been blessed herself cannot help but pass this blessing on to the next one; yes, wherever she is, she must be herself a blessing. The renewal of the world, which seems so impossible, becomes possible in the blessing of God. [232]

## The Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

1. Bethge's biography of Bonhoeffer [see **Bibliography**] remains the definitive work.
2. Bethge, p.4
3. *L.P.P.*, pp. 347/8
4. The photograph appears in *Pictures*, p. 35
5. *L.P.P.*, p. 17
6. For further discussion of Bonhoeffer's views on class, see the section on the *F.F.P.*
7. *F.F.P.*, p. xii
8. de-Gruchy, p. 84
9. Morris, p. vii
10. Morris, p. 40
11. Morris, pp. 50/1
12. Morris, p. 53
13. Morris, p. 54
14. cf. Morris, p.54
15. Morris, p. 51
16. Bethge, p. 23
17. Morris, pp. 90/1
18. Morris, p. 93
19. Morris, p. 132
20. Morris, p. 4
21. Bethge, p. 20
22. Bethge, p. 28
23. Fowler/Lovin, p. 162
24. Fowler/Lovin, p. 162
25. Bethge, p. 42

26. Bethge, p. 76
27. de-Gruchy, p. 50
28. Bethge, p. 109
29. Bethge, p. 112
30. Bethge, p. 116
31. *Pictures*, p. 74
32. Bethge, p. 129
33. Bethge, p. 130
34. Bethge, p. 165
35. Bethge, p. 154
36. Bethge, p. 154
37. Bethge, pp. 154/5
38. Fowler/Lovin, p. 164
39. Bethge, p. 341
40. Bethge, pp. 385/6
41. Other members of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's family were also involved in anti-Nazi activities. For more information see the poignant collection: *LAST LETTERS OF RESISTANCE - FAREWELLS FROM THE BONHOEFFER FAMILY* (Fortress Press, 1986), and Bethge's Biography.
42. Bethge, p. 237
43. See 'A Confessional Courage: The Life of Martin Niemoeller', *Sojourners* / August 1981, pp. 11 - 14.
44. *Pictures*, p. 135
45. Gill, p. 50
46. *Pictures*, p. 157
47. Morris, p. 129
48. Morris, pp. 130/1
49. McClendon, p. 203
50. McClendon, pp. 203/4
51. See Bethge in Clements [*What Freedom ?*], p. 34
52. Bethge, p. 581
53. Bethge, p. 582
54. Fowler/Lovin, p. 173
55. Fowler/Lovin, p. 30
56. Bethge, p. 585
57. Bethge, p. 590
58. Bethge, p. 606

59. Bethge, p. 606

60. Bethge, pp. 607/8

61. Swomley, p. 159

62. See Bethge in Clements [*What Freedom ?*], p. 37

63. Swomley, p. 165

64. Swomley, p. 165

65. Morris, p. 107

66. Morris, p. 107

67. Bethge, p. 694

68. Bethge, p. 695

69. Bethge, p. 695

70. Gill, p. 107

71. Morris, p. 107

72. Morris, p. 66

73. For further evidence see the essay in *Ethics* entitled 'What is Meant By "Telling the Truth" ?' [pp. 363-372 in U.S. ed.] See also *L.P.P.*, pp. 158/9 [ = Footnote on p. 372 of *Ethics*].

74. Bethge, pp. 715/6

75. Bethge, p. 718

76. Gill, p. 115

77. *Pictures*, p. 205

78. Bethge, p. 750

79. *L.P.P.*, pp. 347/8

80. *Pictures*, p. 220

81. Bethge, p. 715

82. Bethge, p. 715

83. In response to those who claim that his life and work represents a theology of atheism, we have no reason to doubt that Bonhoeffer continued in a discipline of daily devotions up until his death.

84. Bethge, pp. 830/1

85. Bethge, p. 830

## The Thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

### Introduction

1. *Sanctorum Communio* - written 1927 / first published 1930.
2. *Act and Being* - written 1929 / first published 1931.
3. *Creation and Fall* - lectures given 1932-3 / first pub. 1937.
4. de-Gruchy, pp. 15/16
5. *Christology* - lectures given 1933 / reconstructed from students' notes and published posthumously.
6. *The Cost of Discipleship* - based on classes at Finkenwalde 1934-7 / first published 1937.
7. *Spiritual Care* - from classes at Finkenwalde 1935-8 / published posthumously.
8. *Life Together* - written 1938 / first published 1939.
9. *Ethics* - written between 1940-3 at various locations, and unfinished. Published posthumously.
10. *Fiction From Prison* - written in prison during 1943, and unfinished. Published posthumously.
11. *Letters and Papers From Prison* - written in prison 1943/4, and published posthumously.
12. See Appendix for a brief discussion.
13. See Bibliography
14. See Chapter One. The three headings which Bethge uses in his biography have no explicit connection to Fowler's Faith Stages.

### Theologian

15. de-Gruchy, p. 6
16. de-Gruchy, p. 6
17. See the discussion of Bonhoeffer's 'Outline for a Book', specifically that concerning the section entitled 'The Real Meaning of Christian Faith' [below].
18. *C.S.*, p. 63.
    It has been pointed out that the German word *Gemeinde*, usually rendered in Bonhoeffer's works by the English word 'community',

can also be translated as 'congregation'. Of Bonhoeffer's famous phrase *Christus als Gemeinde existierend*, Rochelle observes: 'it is usually clear that he means both a theological and a social description by this term; in any case, he means more than a building or an aggregate of people: "Christ *exists* as the community / congregation."' [Jay C. Rochelle: Introduction to *Spiritual Care*, p. 11 (Rochelle's emphasis)]

19. *C.S.*, p. 100

20. *C.S.*, p. 101

21. *C.S.*, p. 130

22. *C.S.*, p. 131
This statement was actually lived out by Bonhoeffer himself in his later involvement with the Conspiracy. For in his involvement with the Conspirators, Bonhoeffer embarked upon a course of action prompted by his concern for his fellow countrypersons, yet chosen at the risk of misunderstanding or condemnation from many of his fellow Churchpersons.

23. *C.S.*, p. 131

24. de-Gruchy, pp. 30/1

25. *C.S.*, p. 201/2

26. The thought first occurs in *C.F.*, where Bonhoeffer writes of the Tree of Life in Genesis 2 that:
'The life that comes forth from God is in the middle. This means that God, who gives life, is in the middle.' [p. 50] The phrase comes from the *L.P.P.*, as for example in the statement that 'God is beyond in the midst of our life.' [p. 282]

27. *A.B.*, p. 28

28. Burtness, p. 250

29. *A.B.*, pp. 90/1

30. *A.B.*, p. 80 [Footnote]

31. *A.B.*, p. 124

32. *A.B.*, p. 121

33. James W. Woelfel
*Bonhoeffer's Theology: Classical & Revolutionary*
[Abingdon, 1970], p. 141. Quoted by Burtness, p. 250

34. *A.B.*, p. 121

35. Briefly, Bonhoeffer's concern in this work is to compare two approaches to the concept of God current at his time. The first, "act theology", is exemplified by Barth, and claims that human beings 'cannot "know" God with great certainty; [they] can only listen in the moments of revelation [ie. God's acts].' The second, "being theology" is exemplified by Tillich, and claims that human beings '**can** know God' in God's being. [Kuhns, pp. 27 - 28]

36. Bethge, p. 164 (Otto Dudzus is the student.)

37. *C.F.*, p. 36

38. *C.F.*, p. 61

39. *C.F.*, p. 61

40. *C.F.*, pp. 73/4

41. *C.F.*, p. 89

42. *Christology*, p. 102

43. *Christology*, p. 60

45. de Gruchy, p. 18

46. *Christology*, p. 97

47. de Gruchy, p. 32

**Christian**

48. Kuhns, p. 84

49. de Gruchy, p. 25

50. Kuhns, p. 229

51. Bethge, p. 112

52. *L.P.P.*, pp. 271-3

53. Bethge, International Bonhoeffer Society for Archive and Research *Newsletter* #12 (April 1978), pp. 6-7.
G. Clarke Chapman cites Bethge in his paper, What Would Bonhoeffer Say Today to Christian Peacemakers ?, and notes Bethge's view that his friend never ceased to be a pacifist. This study, following Kuhns and others, suggests that Bonhoeffer never was an absolute pacifist. Nevertheless, it may be that the two views are not so far apart as it would appear, for in his biography [p. 92], Bethge speaks of what he calls Bonhoeffer's 'conditional pacifism' - a concept strikingly similar to that of Kuhns, whose work appeared in the same year as the original German edition of Bethge's monumental work. [Chapman's paper was originally presented to the 1988 Conference of the International Bonhoeffer Society for Archive & Research held in Amsterdam, and is reprinted in Runyon's collection.]

54. Larry Rasmussen
*Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance*
[Abingdon, 1972], p. 120. Quoted by Chapman, p. 167

55. Professor F. Burton Nelson - personal conversation.

56. Chapman, p. 169

57. Bishop, p. 130

58. de Gruchy, p. 156

59. de Gruchy, p. 25

60. *C.D.*, p. 54

61. *C.D.*, p. 29

62. *C.D.*, p. 35

63. *C.D.*, p. 45

64. *C.D.*, p. 37

65. C.D., p. 79

66. *C.D.*, p. 202

67. cf. *C.D.*, pp. 164/5

68. *C.D.*, p. 49

69. *C.D.*, p. 191

70. *C.D.*, p. 54

71. *C.D.*, pp. 77-79

72. *C.D.*, p. 107

73. C.D., p. 128.
See also Bonhoeffer's 1937 Sermon on Psalm 58, *Meditating on the the Word*, pp. 84 - 96. Here Bonhoeffer counsels prayer in the face of enemies, and further, that all vengeance be left to God. Thus David McI Gracie writes in his commentary: '[The sermon] can be seen as an attempt to pronounce the judgment of God on the Nazi regime, while still holding Christians back from any direct role as agents of that judgment.' [p. 84]

74. cf. *C.D.*, p. 132

75. *C.D.*, p. 127

76. *C.D.*, p. 207

77. Morris, p. 31

78. *C.D.*, pp. 234/5

79. Bonhoeffer, *God's Guest*, p. 24

80. Bonhoeffer, *God's Guest*, p. 27

81. *C.D.*, p. 215

82. *C.D.*, p. 216

83. *C.D.*, pp. 216-8

84. Kuhns, p. 147 [cf. *Ethics*, p. 206 / Macmillan ed.]

85. *L.P.P.*, p. 369 [21.7.44]

86. Bethge notes that Bonhoeffer 'had always been inclined to add a third [mark of the Church], that of earthly community, to the two classic [marks], the Word and the Sacrament'. Thus ' "Church is not a community of souls ... Nor is Church merely the proclamation of the Gospel. In other words, Church is not

merely pulpit, but Church is the Real Body of Christ on earth."' [*Unser Weg nach dem Zeugnis der Schrift* (1938), quoted by Bethge, p. 372. The passage is to be found in the *Gesammelte Schriften* 2 [p. 327].

87. *C.D.*, p. 272

88. *C.D.*, p. 274 [Bonhoeffer refers here to Galatians 2:20]

89. C.D., p. 272
Bonhoeffer also observes:'By being partakers of Christ incarnate, we are partakers in the whole humanity which He bore.' [p. 272]

90. Bethge, p. 478

91. *S.C.*, p. 33

92. *S.C.*, pp. 62/3

93. *S.C.*, p. 68

94. *S.C.*, p. 55

95. *L.T.*, p. 10

96. *L.T.*, p. 38

97. *L.T.*, p. 9

98. *L.T.*, p. 76

99. *L.T.*, pp. 77/8

100. *L.T.*, p. 81

101. *Legacy*, p. 65

102. *L.T.*, p. 57

103. *L.T.*, p. 58

104. *L.T.*, p. 67
In Bonhoeffer's case, it had, as can be seen from his subsequent life story.

105. *L.T.*, p. 85

106. Bethge, p. 581

107. Bethge, p. 581, citing *C.D.*, pp. 102 ff

**Contemporary**

108. Brief discussion of the state of research regarding the text and arrangement of the *Ethics* is to be found in the Appendix. However, the following points are relevant at this stage:

(a) It 'can be stated confidently that we possess all the material that Bonhoeffer wrote for his *Ethics*.' [Clifford Green in Peck, p. 12]

(b) The material which appears in the English translation as Part 2, appears in the original German editions as an Appendix. Therefore, this material, although of value in considering the development of Bonhoeffer's thought, is not to be regarded as forming a part of the work which we now know as the *Ethics*. Its placement in this volume is due merely to its common subject matter, namely Christian ethics.

(c) Bonhoeffer's work on what we now know as the *Ethics* commenced in 1940.

(d) Regarding the titles of the various sections of the *Ethics*, it is suggested that the German word rendered 'Decay' in 'The Love of God and Decay of the World' would more appropriately be rendered 'Disintegration'. This would appear also to be a more fitting description of the reality of Bonhoeffer's wartime world. It is also suggested that the clumsy sounding title 'The Last Things and the Things Before the Last' would be more elegantly [and possibly more accurately] translated using Bonhoeffer's own terms: 'The Ultimate and the Penultimate'.
[Further discussion on these and other points can be found in Peck's collection.]

109. International Bonhoeffer Society for Archive and Research - Amsterdam Conference 1988

110. *Ethics*, [Macmillan edition], p. 11ff

111. Cited by Pfeifer, *Legacy*, p. 14

112. *Ethics*, p. 134 [Unless otherwise stated, reference is made to the S.C.M. edition.]

113. *Ethics*, p. 135

114. *Ethics*, pp. 126/7

115. de-Gruchy [citing Larry Rasmussen], p. 50

116. de-Gruchy, p. 32

117. *Ethics*, p. 53

118. *Ethics*, p. 56

119. *Ethics*, p. 61

120. *Ethics*, p. 63

121. *Ethics*, p. 61

122. *Ethics*, pp. 64/5

123. *Ethics*, pp. 65/6

124. *Ethics*, p. 68

125. *Ethics*, p. 90

126. *Ethics*, p. 95

127. *Ethics*, p. 97

128. *Ethics*, p. 89

129. *Ethics*, p. 98

130. *Ethics*, p. 100

131. *Ethics*, p. 99

132. *Ethics*, p. 98

133. *Ethics*, pp. 100/1

134. de-Gruchy, p. 32

135. *Ethics, p. 134 [Macmillan edition]*

*136.* *Ethics*, p. 119

137. *Ethics*, p. 65

138. *Ethics*, p. 135
Indeed, for Bonhoeffer the taking of life in such circumstances is not merely permissible but imperative. Peck suggests that the so-called euthanasia text actually refers to the situation in which Bonhoeffer found himself *vis a vis* the conspiracy against Hitler, and contains his justification for his own involvement. [Peck, pp. 141 ff]

139. Kuhns, p. 127

140. *Ethics*, p. 167

141. *Ethics*, pp. 169/70

142. *Ethics*, p. 173

143. Luther's twofold description of the Christian as both free and servant stands behind the tension, which Bonhoeffer seeks to explore, between Freedom and Responsibility. In the reformer's words: 'A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all. [Martin Luther: *Treatise on Christian Liberty*, ed. H.J. Grimm (Fortress Press, 1957])*,* p. 7]

144. *Ethics*, p. 191

145. *Ethics*, p. 192

146. *Ethics*, p. 193

147. *Ethics*, p. 196

148. *Ethics*, p. 197

149. *Ethics*, p. 197

150. *Ethics*, p. 200

151. Ethics, p. 204
As far back as 1932, Bonhoeffer could claim that: 'The possibility of judging whether our action is good lies alone in Christ, the present and future One. All other "secure" possibilities, which appear to give continuity to the action, are to be rejected: 1. the orders of creation; 2. conscience; 3. a Christian principle of love; 4. the situation itself;

5. laying claim to the forgiveness of sins; 6. the Law, even in the form of the Sermon on the Mount. ['Gibt es eine christliche Ethik ?' ( 1932 seminar reconstructed from students' mss.) cited by Larry Rasmussen in Peck, p. 112]
Rasmussen continues, referring to *C.D.*, by observing that, despite the work's seemingly clear ethics of command, 'reflection on method is simply missing...' [Peck, p. 119]

152. *Ethics*, p. 210

153. Ethics, p. 210
John D. Godsey notes the importance for Bonhoeffer of the principle that 'We do not love God *in* the neighbor but the *real neighbor* himself or herself.' [Peck, p. 233]

154. *Ethics*, p. 214

155. *Ethics*, p. 216

156. *Ethics*, p. 217

157. *Ethics*, p. 223

158. *Ethics*, p. 227

159. *Ethics*, p. 240

160. *Ethics*, p. 244

161. *Ethics*, p. 236

162. *Ethics*, p. 235

163. Ethics, p. 245 [The 'Mandates' are first mentioned pp. 179 - 84]
Charles West draws attention to Bonhoeffer's own statement [*Ethics*, p. 207] that the Mandates are 'divinely imposed tasks' and not 'determinations of being'. West notes the distinction between what he refers to as an 'ordained structure' [as in the traditional understanding of the Orders of Creation] and Bonhoeffer's concept of 'divine calling'. [Peck, p. 248]

164. *Ethics*, p. 247

165. *Ethics*, p. 264

166. The *Augsburg Confession* Article XVI on Civil Government reads:
'It is taught among us that all government in the world and all established rule and laws were instituted and ordained by God for the sake of good order, and that Christians may without sin occupy civil offices or serve as princes and judges, render decisions and pass sentence according to imperial and other existing laws, punish evildoers with the sword, engage in just wars, serve as soldiers, buy and sell, take required oaths, possess property, be married etc.'
*The Book of Concord* [ed. Tappert]: Fortress Press (1959), p. 37

167. cf. *Ethics*, p. 143 [Macmillan edition]

168. *Ethics*, p. 143 [Macmillan edition]

169. *Ethics, p. 143 [Macmillan edition]*

*170.* *Ethics*, p. 144 [Macmillan edition]

171. Lovin, p. 143

172. Lovin, p. 145

173. Lovin, p. 141

174. Lovin, p. 142

175. *Ethics*, p. 286 [Macmillan edition]

176. None of the writings emerging from prison were prepared with a view to their eventual publication.

177. *L.P.P.*, p. 275 [22.4.44]

178. *L.P.P.*, p. 105 [5.9.53]

179. *L.P.P.*, p. 109 [13.9.43]

180. *F.F.P.*, p. ix

181. *L.P.P.*, pp. 129/39 [18.11.43]

182. *L.P.P.*, p. 94 [17.8.43]

183. *F.F.P.*, p. 144

184. *F.F.P.*, p. 145

185. See *F.F.P.*, p. 144 ff

186. *F.F.P.*, p. 15

187. *F.F.P.*, p. 161 [Zerner quotes the text from p. 14]

188. See Bethge, p. 830, note 54

189. *F.F.P.*, p. 169

190. *F.F.P.*, p. 154

191. *F.F.P.*, p. 76

192. *L.P.P.*, pp. 373, 380, 394. [July / August 1944]

193. *F.F.P.*, p. 25

194. *F.F.P.*, p. 157

195. *F.F.P.*, p. 157

196. *L.P.P.*, p. 380

197. *L.P.P.*, p. 325 [8.6.44]

198. *L.P.P.*, p. 380

199. *L.P.P.*, p. 381

200. *L.P.P.*, p. 360 [17.7.44] Burtness (above) renders the phrase 'as though God were not given'.

201. *L.P.P.*, p. 360

202. de-Gruchy, p. 38

203. *L.P.P.*, p. 156 [5.12.43]

204. *L.P.P.*, p. 157

205. *L.P.P.*, p. 168 [18.12.43]

206. *L.P.P.*, p. 303 [20.5.44]

207. *L.P.P.*, p. 303

208. *L.P.P.*, p. 164 [5.12.43]

209. *L.P.P.*, p. 234 [19.3.44]

210. *L.P.P.*, p. 279 [30.4.44]

211. *L.P.P.*, p. 300 [May 1944]
An alternative translation of this key phrase of Bonhoeffer's is suggested by Larry Rasmussen. For 'righteous action' [with its implicit focus on oneself] Rasmussen substitutes 'doing justice' [with its implicit focus on the neighbour].
[Rasmussen, *Legacy* / p. 270)

212. *L.P.P.*, p. 381

213. *L.P.P.*, p. 393 [23.8.44]

214. *L.P.P.*, pp. 369-70 [21.7.44]

215. *L.P.P.*, p. 281 [30.4.44]

216. See *L.P.P.*, p. 129

217. *L.P.P.*, p. 381

218. *L.P.P.*, p. 381

219. *C.S.*, p. 6

220. *L.P.P.*, p. 382
For Bonhoeffer's use of the concept of *disciplina arcani*, see the essay by Larry Rasmussen in *Legacy* and also the article by John W. Matthews (see Bibliography).
Rasmussen suggests that arcane discipline was for Bonhoeffer the counterpoint to his concern for Christian engagement with the world [cf. the pairing of Prayer and Doing Justice]. Rasmussen refers to the 'concentrated nurture' necessary for involvement in the world 'incognito ... [and] making common cause with the non-Christian and nonreligious, all without ecclesiastical and theological pretense and qualification'. [pp. 278-9]
Matthews, by contrast, suggests that, both historically and linguistically, the concept of *disciplina arcani* is better understood as 'responsible sharing of the mystery' [of Christian faith]. Furthermore, in Bonhoeffer it is not to be understood [following Rasmussen] as 'a pious counterpart to the worldly, non-religious, secular interpretation of biblical concepts', but rather the latter is to be seen as an 'important implication' of *disciplina arcani*.

221. *L.P.P.*, pp. 280-1 [30.4.44]

222. *L.P.P.*, p. 286 [5.5.44]

223. *Legacy*, p. 278

224. *L.P.P.*, p. 382

225. *L.P.P.*, p. 382

226. *L.P.P.*, p. 393 [23.8.44]

227. *L.P.P.*, p. 379 [3.8.44]

228. *L.P.P.*, p. 382

229. *L.P.P.*, p. 382

230. *L.P.P.*, p. 383

231. *L.P.P.*, p. 383

232. *Meditating on the Word*, p. 99 [1944]

# 3

# Thomas Merton
# 1915 - 1968

## The Life of Thomas Merton

### Early Life

Thomas Merton was born on January 31, 1915, in Prades, France, the son of an artist couple. His father, Owen Merton, was a New Zealander; his mother, Ruth Jenkins, an American. Therefore, from the outset, Merton was part of an unconventional and cosmopolitan family. Religiously, both were Episcopalians, and were married at an Anglican Church in London. Owen remained nominally an Episcopalian, though he was later to fall out with his local Church, where he played the organ. Ruth, however, was to change her alleigance soon after her marriage, to the Society of Friends. Yet, as Mott points out, there is no evidence to show that she actually joined the Quakers. Rather it appears that Ruth was drawn to the Quakers more on the basis of their pacifism than a specifically religious impulse. [1] Perhaps the major religious influence on Merton's childhood, however, was his paternal grandmother Gertrude Hannah Merton. Gertrude came to stay when Tom was four years old

and, finding that her grandson had not been taught to pray, proceeded night by night to teach him the Lord's Prayer. [2]

In 1916 the Mertons moved from France to the U.S.A., settling on Long Island near Ruth's family. It was there, five years later, that the increasingly cold and critical Ruth died of cancer. Tom was only six years old, and his mother's goodbye to him was contained in a letter Owen brought home from the hospital one day.

In 1918 another son, John Paul, had been born, yet Tom saw relatively little of his brother. Following Ruth's death, the elder boy spent time variously in Bermuda with his father, in New York with his brother and grandparents, in France with his father [1926 - 28], and in England at boarding school [1928 - 34]. These years were to leave a lasting mark on Merton. For during the formative years of childhood and adolescence, the young Tom never had the opportunity to form lasting relationships with people or places. Therefore, it is not surprising that, as Raymond Bailey notes:

> Merton was to go through life feeling himself to be without nationality or roots.

Furthermore, the 'abnormal human relationships' of his childhood were also to be significant for Merton's later life:

> His notebooks reveal a strong sense of failure that he never developed a really intimate relationship with an individual. He could love the world and God and persons as persons, but he had difficulty giving himself to any single person. [3]

Merton was sixteen when his father died. He continued his studies in England alone, and entered Cambridge in 1933. A contemporary of his at school decribes Merton as a deep thinker, and as one who did everything to excess. [4] Prior to the commencement of his studies at Cambridge, Merton visited Rome and [like the young Dietrich Bonhoeffer nine years before] was profoundly affected by the experience. At Cambridge Merton lived a somewhat dissolute life, fathering an illegitimate child in the process. Monica Furlong thinks it likely that Merton's Guardian made a financial settlement out of court. [5] But whatever happened behind the scenes, in 1934 Merton returned to America and the following year commenced studies at the University of Columbia.

## Student and Academic

During an otherwise typical student life at New York's Columbia University, Merton became increasingly interested in Catholic thought. A key factor here was his discovery, in February 1937, of Etienne Gilson's book *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*. As Walter Conn explains:

> It was a great relief for Merton to discover that no idea or sensible image could contain God, and further that we must not be satisfied with such knowledge of God. [6]

Merton purchased Gilson's book under a misapprehension as to its contents, and found to his surprise that Catholic thought could appeal to him. Despite its *imprimateur*, reminding him of all 'he feared

about the Catholic Church', Merton read the book and was changed. Here was

> the first understanding of God he had ever encountered which was not a simplistic anthropomorphism. [7]

At the same time, Merton's academic study in Scholastic Philosophy under Professor Dan Walsh led Walsh to observe of his student, that his bent was more towards the

> spiritual, *mystical, voluntaristic and practical way of St.* Augustine *and his followers*

than that of the intellectual, speculative approach of Thomism. [8] Even at this early stage, therefore, it appears that the essentially apophatic, poetic approach to God, characteristic of Merton's writings, was already a mark of his thought.

Academically, Merton continued at Columbia until 1939, the final year comprising study towards a postgraduate M.A. in English Literature. At the same time his interest in Catholicism was growing. Ironically it was a Hindu Monk, Bramachari, on a visit to Columbia in the Spring of 1938, who, asked by Merton for advice on spiritual reading, referred the student back to his own Christian tradition. This, at the time unwelcome, advice was nevertheless significant for Merton's ongoing spiritual quest, for by the end of the year he had been Baptised a Catholic.

## Baptism

The late Summer of 1938 marked Merton's first attendance at Mass, and another significant point in his spiritual quest. Merton speaks of his feelings upon leaving the Church, after staying only for the sermon, as 'happy', 'at peace', and 'content with life'.

> All I know is that I walked in a new world...

he wrote. [9] Finally, whilst reading one day, he felt a strong urge to take the step of becoming a Catholic. What was preventing him ? That moment, the culmination of over eighteen months transformation from atheism, he went straight to the local priest and asked to become a Catholic. And so, on November 16, 1938, at Corpus Christi Church in New York, Thomas Merton was Baptised a Catholic and received his first communion.

In many ways Merton's lifestyle continued as before his Baptism. At his own admission, he contiued to live very much for himself. Just prior to his Baptism he had thought of the priesthood, but had shelved the idea. Some time later, however, during the Autumn of the following year, the idea came to him again:

> I am going to be a priest.

This was no whim, but

> a new and profound and clear sense that this was what I really ought to do

coming though, as it did, during breakfast with some friends after a late night. [10] And so, that evening Merton attended a Jesuit Church, and during the Service of Benediction made his commitment:

> Yes, I want to be a priest, with all my heart I want it. If it is Your will, make me a priest - make me a priest. [11]

During the years 1940 and 1941, Merton taught English at St. Bonaventure University, a Franciscan College in the west of New York State. He had made initial approaches with a view to joining the Franciscan order, but these had not proved fruitful, largely because of his honesty concerning his Cambridge past. Therefore, Merton decided to live in the world as if he were a Monk, and it was with such a project in mind that he commenced work at St. Bonaventure's in the Autumn of 1940.

It was Easter 1941 when Merton attended a retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. Dan Walsh, now his friend as well as his former professor, had told him about this Trappist Monastery, and the young Catholic warmed to it and felt again his desire for the Monastic life. At Gethsemani, Merton wrote in his journal:

> I should tear out all the other pages of this book and all the other pages of everything else I ever wrote, and begin here.
> This is the center of America. I had wondered what was holding this country together, what has been keeping the universe from cracking in pieces and falling apart. It is this monastery - if only this one. [12]

Yet, however positive he sounded about Gethsemani, this was not the only community which Merton felt to be beckoning him. Following his visit to Kentucky, Merton was faced with another call - that of the Baroness de Hueck Doherty's 'Friendship House'. Merton worked for a few weeks at this community in New York's troubled Harlem district following a visit by the Baroness to the St. Bonaventure Summer School. And soon after the academic year had got under way again, he had decided to leave St. Bonaventure's and join the community in Harlem. However, as Mott's biography reveals, Merton was effectively torn between the two possible vocations. He reveals much of his thinking, and the accompanying progression of events, in a letter to the Baroness dated December 6, 1941 [four days before he finally arrived at Gethsemani]:

> When you came along, everything you said made perfect good sense, and I was glad to think that perhaps this was what I had been praying for. I saw F.H., and liked it: what actually inspired me was the idea of complete poverty, real poverty, without security: and also the fact that Harlem is where Christ is...
>
> Meanwhile I had made a couple of Trappist retreats, and was practically driven silly by the conflict between my desire to share that kind of life and my belief that it was absolutely impossible [because of the Cambridge episode]...
>
> Well, when I had agreed to go to Harlem, it seemed as though the question was answered, for the time being...
>
> Then I made Father Furfey's retreat [Thanksgiving 1941 at F.H.]
>
> And what happened ? I started thinking about the Trappists again... I went to one of the priets here... and he told me at once that in his opinion there was no impediment...
>
> So then I wrote to the Trappists... [13]

In addition, Merton had also heard from the Draft Board that they wished to reclassify him, possibly leading to his eligibility for military service. Work at F.H. would not prevent him from being drafted. Therefore, he begins his concluding paragraph:

> So you see, it is apparently not God's will that I should serve him in Harlem now. [14]

**Entry into Gethsemani**

Thomas Merton entered The Abbey of Gethsemani, Kentucky, on December 10, 1941. William Shannon notes the uncannily precise division of Merton's life: 26 years and eleven months from birth to Gethsemani; 27 years to the day from his entry into the monastery to his death in Bangkok. [15] Walter Conn suggests that at this point in his life Merton's was in part a Conventional and in part an Individuative faith. It was Conventional in that Merton had submitted himself to the external authority of the Church, accepting

> given, radically unquestioned Christian values and beliefs on the authority of the Catholic Church. [16]

But Merton's was also an Individuative faith, for he himself took responsibility for the commitments, beliefs, attitudes, and lifestyle which his new-found vocation necessitated. In choosing to accept his vocation as a Catholic and as a Monk, Merton chose also to accept - as a given - the precise content of these choices. For the Church defined what it meant both to be a Catholic and a Monk.

At the time of Merton's entry into Gethsemani, Roman Catholicism was a religion of great certainty. Shannon notes that in the Catholic Church of the 1940s, faith was like a blank cheque for the Church and its Theologians to fill in. Plurality of theological expression was prohibited. *And so, Catholicism was not concerned* with searching for truth, but rather with seeking to preserve it. Initially, Shannon observes, Merton found in Gethsemani the discipline he was looking for, and revelled in the newfound certainties of both Church and Monastery. [17]

Both Conn and Mott note the element of expiation in Merton's motivation to join a Monastic Order. Mott cites Merton's [as yet] unpublished *Perry Street Journal*, where, in an entry dated October 16 1939, he wrote:

> But now, on top of this, the argument in St. Thomas: that the man who has repented of great sins should forsake even lawful things and give up even more than those who have always obeyed God, and sacrifice *everything*. [18]

And so, Merton was quite prepared for the extreme rigours of life in the Monastery. Here at last was the stability and discipline which for so long had been lacking from his life. But, as Shannon also observes, Merton had 'too great a mind' and 'too honest an outlook' to live happily for long with what, in retrospect, was clearly an oppressive security. [19]

In March 1944, Merton made his Simple Vows. His Solemn Vows followed in 1947. Finally, in May 1949, he was ordained.

It was during these early years in the monastery that Merton was to see his younger brother for the last time. John Paul's visit to Gethsemani was a particularly significant occasion for Merton, because during his visit his brother received instruction and was Baptised into the Catholic Church. And so, the two brothers, who had never been particularly close - largely because of their unconventional family circumstances, were finally brought together. Sadly, John Paul was killed in action the next Spring, and so Merton's feelings against war are likely to have been further heightened by the tragedy.

Throughout these early years, Merton was encouraged by his monastic superiors to continue writing. In November 1944, *Thirty Poems* was published; a history of the Cistercian Order was written during 1947 and published two years later; and most significantly, his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* was published in 1948. The latter work was an unexpected success, and Thomas Merton - Trappist Monk was at the same time a bestselling author. A year later *Seeds of Contemplation* was published, and thereafter Merton published at least one book nearly every year until his death.

### The Search for a Monastic Identity

The question as to whether he should become a Carthusian rather than a Trappist was one which was to trouble Merton throughout the 1940s, and periodically throughout his life. The

attraction of the Carthusian Order was their emphasis on solitude, and this continued to be the object of Merton's yearning throughout the remaining twenty years of his life. But circumstances [God ?] had brought him to the Trappists, and in the end this was the Order with which he stayed. At the time of his Solemn Profession, though, the Carthusian question was a significant unsettling factor in the young Monk's life at Gethsemani. After the profession he had [perhaps not surprisingly] serious doubts about the whole Trappist enterprise. However, these gradually subsided, and Merton again settled into the life of Gethsemani.

This period of questioning and uncertainty surrounding his Solemn Profession marks, from the perspective of faith stage theory, a 'definitive move' in Merton to a fully Individuative faith. At this stage in his life, according to Conn, we see the

> clear emergence from Merton's struggle for identity of an autonomous sense of himself and of his own power of judgment. [20]

Here is the Merton who was so excited by Gilson's book only ten years before, emerging again from the enthusiastic and unquestioning acceptance characteristic of his first years in Gethsemani. For in the same way that God cannot be limited to human ideas and concepts of God, so also the shape of the Church cannot be defined exhaustively by existing structures and institutions. And both were to become concerns of the mature Merton. Therefore, the following years were to be years in which Merton would seek to define and establish his identity, and one way in which he was to do this was through his

writing. Indeed, the question of Identity was one which was to absorb Merton, in both his life and thought, until his untimely death.

The latter part of 1949, following his Ordination, through to the end of 1950, was a time of depression for Merton. Then, in 1951 he was appointed Master of Scholastics. This appointment, Conn suggests, was the focus for a significant development in Merton's view of the world. For this work with students preparing for their Solemn Vows and for the Priesthood, was Merton's first experience in the Monastery of responsibility for others. Of his realisation before hearing of his appointment, Merton wrote that he saw 'for the first time' that he had a duty

> to live as a member of a human race which is no more (and no less) ridiculous than I am myself. And my first human act is the recognition of how much I owe everybody else. [21]

His apppointment as Master of Scholastics presented Merton with an opportunity to repay something of this debt which he had acknowledged. He remained in the post until 1955, when he offered himself for Master of Novices.

During the first half of the 1950s, Merton again felt the attraction of the Carthusians. His own Order were, strictly speaking, "Active Contemplatives", whereas the Carthusians placed a greater emphasis on solitude, both within the community, and outside it as hermits. The Cistercian tradition, by contrast, had no hermits. In 1955 Merton actually requested a transfer to the Camaldolese, an Order of hermits, but this eventually came to nothing.

While his request was being processed his superiors offered the dissatisfied Monk an opportunity to staff the nearby Forestry Department lookout tower. This would have given him almost complete physical solitude, whilst also maintaining his connection with the Trappists at Gethsemani. However, it was at this time that the Master of Novices position came vacant and Merton offered himself for this and was accepted. Soon afterwards he heard that his request for a transfer to the Camaldolese had been denied.

William Shannon suggests that even in the early 1950s Merton was beginning to move from a speculative [Scholastic] theology to a more experiential [Mystical] theology. Certainly such a shift is understandable in the light of Conn's observation regarding Merton's faith stage, that by the late 1940s it was fully individuative. The succeeding years, therefore, become years of consolidation - of the establishing of identity. Furthermore, Shannon notes that by the late 1950s Merton had come to trust his own experience more and to exercise less caution in using poetic language to articulate this. [22] No doubt his involvement with the formation of new entrants into the Order was an important influence here. In both his posts, but especially as Master of Novices, Merton was in personal contact with many people just one step away from the outside world. Of the impact of this experience Conn writes [perhaps overstating his case somewhat]:

> Once he had broken through the monastic walls of conventional morality into the fresh air of critical inquiry, his moral consciousness needed only the fertile ground of existential responsibility for others in order to take root and finally

blossom into a postconventional orientation of autonomous conscience. [23]

Faced with the real needs of real people, the absolutes and institutions of monastic convention become relativised for Merton. And so, as in theology so too in ethics, Merton's approach becomes more personal and experiential and less conventional and theoretical. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the journals covering this period [1956 - 1965] were published by Merton [albeit after extensive editing] as *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.

## The Reawakening of a Social Conscience

By 1957 Merton was reading politics, Nicaraguan Ernesto Cardenal was one of his novices, and Merton himself was learning again about the complex world outside the Monastery walls. After sixteen years of self-chosen isolation from political realities

his conscience now drew him back again to social issues. [24]

A second significant development in Merton's understanding of his relationship to the wider world is marked by his so-called "Vision in Louisville". As he wrote in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, published some years after the experience:

> In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realisation that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and

> supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream... [25]

Merton continues by affirming his vocation: he is not questioning the Monastic life itself, but rather the idea that such a life separates the Monk from other people as 'a different species of being'. Everyone belongs to God, 'we just happen to be conscious of it', he writes. He continues

> I suppose my happiness could have taken form in the words "Thank God, thank God that I **am** like other men, that I am only a man among others."
> ... I have the immense joy of being **man**, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. [26]

This experience marks the breaking down of all the remaining barriers between the Monk and the world. From a self-imposed distancing of himself **from** the world Merton came to affirm a positive sense of responsibility **for** the world:

> It is because I am one with them that I owe it to them to be alone, and when I am alone they are not "they" but my own self. [27]

This sense of unity is important for an understanding of the Merton of the 1960s. For at the centre of his concern for peace and social justice, and for interreligious dialogue, is the sense that, ultimately, all creation is one. In the language of the Louisville experience:

> If only they could see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time... But this cannot be **seen**, only believed and "understood" by a peculiar gift. [29]

The world, as Merton the 'Guilty Bystander' so clearly discerned, is built upon illusion, and the unmasking of the illusion was to be an important part of Merton's Monastic vocation from that time on.

As his appointments to the care of the Scholastics, and later the Novices, had focused his emergent feelings of human solidarity in the service of his brother Monks, so the Louisville experience would focus Merton's awareness of this solidarity in the many writings of political and social criticism to come from his pen in the 1960s. Although the realisation of which he wrote in 1951 [29] was genuine, it seemingly took him no further than his practical responsibilities within the Monastic community. Indeed, Mott's reference to a journal entry of July 1952, where Merton appears still to evidence an attitude of hostility toward the outside world is revealing. Merton wrote of waiting for a plane at Cincinatti airport, that the airport

> seemed to be infected with some moral corruption that had been brought in by the planes from New York. [30]

It was to take time for that ambivalence to be resolved firmly in favour of an attitude of solidarity with the world.

The development of Merton's thinking during this time can be appreciated if one compares the early work *Seeds of Contemplation* [1949] with the later revised edition entitled *New Seeds of Contemplation*, which was published in 1962. [31] Richard Cashen notes that a comparison of the two works

> indicates a growth in Merton's language regarding human autonomy and regarding ecumenism. [32]

He also observes that

> Merton's vision of the meaning and place of the contemplative life in the Church and the world increasingly assumes a more personal expression in his language from 1960 on. [33]

These observations regarding Merton's increasing openness to the world around him lead us to identify a second shift in his faith from the perspective of faith stage theory. The concern with defining and establishing one's personal identity, characteristic of the Individuative stage, gives way to a concern for openness both to the world in general and to alternative viewpoints to one's own, characteristic of the Paradoxical - Consolidative stage. Thus we see a re-emergence of elements of the pre - Monastic Merton, such as social and political concern, and even [eventually] sexual love. Also notable is the increasing openness to experience, rather than submission to convention, which marks the latter years of Merton's life. Put another way: Merton, having established his identity as a human being alongside every other, now chooses to become involved in the whole range of human experience, knowing that as a Christian and as a Monk he is not above and apart from other human beings, but is in fact called to demonstrate in himself a model of true humanity. For Christianity does not reject humanity, but rather fulfills it. Anne Carr summarises these years for Merton as

> a journey from the artificiality of an external identity imposed by his *persona* either as monk or writer to the true self of the person who realizes in experience a relationship to all others, even others of radically distant times and

places, in relationship to the ultimate reality that is God. [34]

The 1960s were indeed a time of involvement for Merton. His writings covered the spectrum from war and peace to Monastic spirituality, from racism to Zen. Yet Merton had the benefit of the perspective offered by his Monastic detachment as he wrote of the terrifying sanity of a nuclear society, of the forthcoming racial conflagration [about which he was right [35]], and about other issues of the day. It seemed that the more he sought solitude, the greater were his insights into the world around him. In 1965, Merton was finally granted permission to live as a hermit in the grounds of the Abbey. This was what he had been yearning for. He had been offered the Forest Department watchtower duty in 1955, but had instead offered himself for the post of Master of Novices. Mott writes of Merton's eventual move into hermitage life ten years later:

> By that time [ie 1965] Merton knew that the hermit who is not on good terms with himself is on the way to disaster. In 1955, Merton was not on *good enough* terms to live in solitude on the top of the fire tower ... or anywhere else. [36]

This is important, for as Carr observes:

> One cannot offer to God a self that one does not already, in some measure, possess. [37]

Indeed,

> personal identity is the reality of a deep and centred self, which ... knows its own experience and can reflect and judge according to its own values. And it is this sense of natural, human identity that is a precondition for any responsible and adult spiritual choice in relation to God and to others, especially the choice of monastic life as a response to God's call. [38]

And so, a quarter of a century after his arrival at Gethsemani, the Monk moved further into the life of solitude he so earnestly sought. His identity established, solitude was embraced not as an escape from the world, but rather as an act of commitment to the world.

Throughout the 1960s Merton received ever increasing amounts of mail, and similarly increasing numbers of visitors. Yet, at the same time, he desperately sought more time alone. Merton could do without neither. He regarded his contacts with people outside the monastery as vitally important (albeit also in need of some restriction on his own part), yet he also needed solitude (sometimes hiding if, on returning to the hermitage, he saw visitors approaching it). This marked ambivalence in Merton's life may be attributed in part to the ambivalence which Anne Carr notes in his attitude to the self. She notes that, for Merton, the "self" is both gift and curse - both 'source of constant anxiety' and 'central gift of God's creation'. [39]

Merton's own words, in the form of a 1967 letter to Catholic theologian Rosemary Reuther, best express his situation as he saw it himself:

> ... now, after twenty-five years, I am in a position where I am practically laicised and deinstitutionalised ... and I feel like a human being again. My hermit life is expressly a lay life. I never wear the habit except when at the monastery and I try to be as much on my own as I can and like the people around the country. Also I try as best I can to keep up valid and living contacts with my friends who are in the thick of things, and everyone knows where my real "community" is... In staying here I am not just being here

> for myself but for my friends, my Church, and all those I am one with. [40]

In a later letter, also to Reuther, Merton writes:

> I think I am probably much more in communication with people all over the place, all over the world, than most active lifers are. [41]

## Love

A significant episode of these final, fruitful years of Merton's life is his love for the young nurse Margie Smith. [42] Perhaps his falling in love with her is, together with his trip to Asia, the final flowering of a faith which has attained the openness of Fowler's Paradoxical - Consolidative stage. There are two sources for information regarding this episode. The first is Mott's offical biography. The second is the work of the originally appointed official biographer, John Howard Griffin. Sadly, Griffin died before he could complete his work. [43] But a volume covering the years 1965 - 1968 has been published posthumously, and this gives a substantial amount of attention to the Monk's love for the young nurse - perhaps reflecting the extent to which Merton himself was absorbed with this reawakening of feelings which had lain dormant since his entry into the Monastery.

Mott writes of Merton in 1965 as

> still haunted both by the inability to love for fear of rejection in the distant past, and what he called his "**refusal**" of women". [44]

He then quotes Merton himself from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, where he asserted that

> Man is most human, and most proves his humanity (I did not say his virility) by the quality of his relationship with women. [45]

But, as Mott adds, Merton himself had as yet not come to terms personally with the implications of his own statement. [46] However, faced with Margie Smith, and with his own feelings of love for her, the Monk began to come to terms with this side of his humanity. Indeed, as Mott observes, when Merton's friends were told of his love for Margie they

> began by congratulating him that he was human. [47]

Merton first met Margie Smith whilst hospitalised in Louisville in March 1966. Margie was the nurse who had been allocated to him, and soon they were both finding pretexts to be together. She was openly affectionate towards the Monk, and in their conversations there emerged a mutual need for friendship at a spiritual level. Griffin reports that they were in love, although at first they did not realise it. When Merton was discharged from the hospital and returned to the Abbey, he left a letter with his address for Margie in the hope that the friendship could continue. Margie responded with a lengthy letter, and soon they were seeing one another as and when it was possible. Merton wrote to Margie that he loved her, and these months are marked by his efforts to be with her

on the one hand, and his feelings of guilt and impropriety on the other. And so he wrote in his journal:

> I will do the only thing possible and risk loving with Christ's love, where there is so obvious a need for it. And not fear. [48]

Later, he wrote:

> It might have nothing to do with the rule books or with any other system, it might be open to all kinds of delusions and error, but in fact, so far, by and large, I have been acting right. [49]

Times together were arranged largely through the agencies of friends. Merton telephoned Margie 'illegally' from the Abbey. When they could not see one another they arranged to think of one another at a set time each day, and whenever they heard a certain song [Joan Baez: *Silver Dagger*]. However, one clandestine telephone call was noticed, and so, believing the Abbot to have been told of his activities, Merton owned up. Although he half wanted to be told not to see Margie again. the other half continued to seek a way to reconcile the love he was experiencing for Margie and the solitude he had sought for so long. One way he justified his love was in the guise of being charitable to Margie. In her the Monk had found one human being with whom he could share his thoughts. She was, in Mott's words

> the one person to whom Merton felt he could open his mind without restaint. [50]

It is important to see this entire episode as a positive experience for Merton. The hermit could be open even to

love. But the question remained as to how that love for a member of the opposite sex could be integrated into a monastic vocation. In the end, it was Merton's experience that love and solitude could not be reconciled within existing structures and institutions, and so ultimately the relationship had no future. Yet Merton's last years are marked by a concern for the renewal of monastic structures in order that they might more effectively foster true humanity. And that concern must be, at least in part, due to his personal conflicts over Margie Smith.

Despite the fact that, from the outset, the relationship was almost inevitably heading for frustration, Merton did not want to terminate his love for Margie, nor could he do so. [51] In September 1966, six months after he first met Margie, Merton made his permanent commitment to hermitage life:

> [to] spend the rest of my life in solitude in so far as my health may permit. [52]

But even after this seemingly decisive move he was unsettled:

> He tried to preserve [his love] in a new solitude, though there were times when he seemed ready to risk even this to join her during the nest year. [53]

Merton saw Margie briefly twice while he was hospitalised in October 1966. Of the following year, Mott notes that 'there are a great many references' to her in the 1967 journal. [54] Finally, Merton telephoned the young nurse during the Summer of 1968. This was the

last time they were to speak with one another. Of this last call, Mott writes:

> he realised the situation was finally hopeless. She ... still loved him, but ... there was nothing she could do. It was over. [55]
> ... he hung up on a note of desperation. [56]

Despite the fact that it was ultimately to end in the frustration of thwarted love, Merton's love for Margie Smith was a resounding re-affirmation of his humanity as a Monk. It was a relationship which, like all human love, had its times of pleasure and times of pain. Yet it was an experience usually denied to Monks. Both biographers record a number of clandestine meetings between the middle-aged Monk and the young nurse, and these help us to appreciate just how Merton entered into this experience of love. The accounts of the relationship are also notable in that they capture something of the naive innocence with which both, it would appear, pursued their love for one another.

In the end, however, the episode which confronted the solitary Monk, convinced that he had a vocation to solitude, with the fact that he too could love and be loved by another human being, also confronted the whole institutional framework of the monastic vocation with a challenge it could only reject. The Monk, it would appear, cannot love in the way Merton loved Margie Smith. [57]

## The Final Year

The final year of Merton's life saw a new Abbot at Gethsemani. Dom Flavian Burns was elected Abbot on January 13 1968. Dom Burns was more open than had been his predecessor Dom James Fox in regard to Merton's participation in conferences and visits outside the monastery. And so Merton left Gethsemani twice during 1968; however from the second trip he was not to return alive.

During May Merton spent some time away from Gethsemani. He led a conference in California, and then went on to New Mexico. The intention was to explore the possibility of a hermitage along the Californian coast, and then in New Mexico to visit the 'experimental foundation' Christ in the Desert. [58] Merton returned to Kentucky at the end of May, having found a possible hermitage cottage not far from the Cistercian convent of Our Lady of the Redwoods where he had led the conference. Throughout the Summer plans were drawn up and revised. In the end it was decided that Merton would visit Alaska and California, largely with a site for a hermitage in mind, on his way to the East for a Monastic conference.

And so, in September 1968, Merton left Gethsemani for the last time. He spent another week in California, of which he wrote:

> I can say without hesitation that the California coast is hopeless as regards solitude. [59]

Even the site that he had found in May was no use. Alaska, however, offered real possibilities [60], but the Asia trip had to come first before any further exploration was possible.

Of Merton's visit to Asia, Mott notes that the Monk

> talked of "coming home" to a place he had never been before. [61]

Certainly, Asia was a place Merton had long wanted to visit, and he wanted to learn from his time there amongst monastic colleagues from his own and other religious traditions. Perhaps the most profound experience of his time in Asia was the sight of the giant Buddhas at Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka. His journal entry on this experience is often quoted:

> I know I have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don't know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise. [62]

That was December 2. On the afternoon of Tuesday December 10, Thomas Merton was found dead, apparently due to accidental electrocution.

Anne Carr notes that in the course of his last address in Bangkok on the day of his death, Merton told a story containing what was in his judgment 'an important monastic statement':

> From now on, everybody stands on his own feet. [63]

Carr suggests that this statement sums up the 'post-conventional religious autonomy' of the mature Merton:

> Authentic autonomy, standing on one's own feet, is only reached in the self-loss of religious realization and conversion, the loss of one's illusory autonomy in its claim to absoluteness, in the context of and [in] relationship to the ultimate [ie God]. [64]

Thomas Merton was buried at the Abbey of Gethsemani on December 17, 1968. At the conclusion of his Burial Service the closing words of his own autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* were read as fitting tribute to the departed Monk:

> But you shall taste the true solitude of My anguish and My poverty and I shall lead you into the high places of My joy and you shall die in Me and find all things in My mercy which has created you for this end and brought you from Prades to Bermuda to St. Antonin to Oakham to London to Cambridge to Rome to New York to Columbia to Corpus Christi to St. Bonaventure to the Cistercian Abbey of the poor men who labor in Gethsemani:
>
> That you may become the brother of God and learn to know the Christ of the burnt men. [65]

Also an appropriate tribute to Merton are the words he heard God addressing to him at the beginning of his monastic vocation:

> And when you have been praised a little and loved a little I will take away all your gifts and all your love and all your praise and you will be utterly forgotten and abandoned and you will be nothing, a dead thing, a rejection. And in that day you shall begin to possess the solitude you have so long desired. And your solitude will bear immense fruit in the souls of men you will never see on earth.
>
> Do not ask when it will be or where it will be or how it will be: On a mountain or in a prison, in a desert or in a concentration camp or in a hospital or at Gethsemani. It does not matter. So do not ask me, because I am not going to tell you. You will not know until you are in it. [66]

# The Thought of Thomas Merton

## Introduction

Thomas Merton was a prolific writer. Therefore, in the light of the size of the extensive *corpus* of work which offers itself for consideration in this section, it has been necessary to be selective, and to consider the most appropriate way to present the thought of this most productive of writers.

In order to sharpen the focus of an otherwise unwieldy project, this study of Merton's thought is concerned primarily with the mature Merton - ie from the late 1950s on - and is organised thematically. Five themes have been chosen, covering a wide range of Merton's work and interests: Contemplation; Theology; The Church [including Monasticism]; Other Religions; Social Criticism. It should be acknowledged here that Merton had other interests as well - he wrote poetry and literary criticism, he enjoyed photography, and in his early years in Gethsemani had been commissioned to write a number of books on Monastic history. Furthermore, he kept extensive journals covering most of the years of his life. Yet the five themes indicated above have been chosen as representing the main concerns of his thought, particularly insofar as this study is concerned:

## Contemplation

The major source for this section is *New Seeds of Contemplation* [1], a revision of the earlier work *Seeds of Contemplation*. *New Seeds* presents the essence of Merton's thought on the Contemplative life in a form accessible to all, and is one of his most widely read books. A secondary, but also very important, source is the posthumously published *Contemplative Prayer* [2], which is described in the foreword as

> unwittingly ... Thomas Merton's final testimony to us [3]

This latter work deals with its subject from the point of view of the history of spirituality, and draws on the Fathers and Mothers of the Church. The two works are therefore complementary both in terms of content and date, the former coming from the early 60s and the latter from the final year of Merton's life.

## Theology

The main source for this section is *The New Man* [4], a book which is of considerable value in any discussion of the specifically theological foundations of Merton's thought. Although essentially a book on spirituality, *The New Man* is nevertheless also an important work of theology.

## The Church

There are two main sources for this section. The first is the collection of essays published under the title *The Monastic Journey* [5], original publication dates of which range from 1957 to 1969. The second is the posthumously published collection *Contemplation in a World of Action* [6], composed of articles originally published in the late 60s and some new material. This latter work is substantially that which Merton presented for publication before his death, but with some deletions and the addition of a number of essays on hermit life.

## Other Religions

Merton wrote a number of works on faith traditions other than his own, yet the chief source for this brief section is Merton's own correspondence with those whose faith he sought to understand and indeed to learn from. These letters are to be found in the first of the projected four volumes of Merton Letters, entitled *The Hidden Ground of Love*: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns [7].

## Social Criticism

The main sources for this section are the collection *Faith and Violence* [8], and Merton's correspondence. *Faith and Violence* is a collection of Merton's writings from the 60s, and includes a number of important essays for any consideration of this area of his thought.

However, it is important also to consult Merton's correspondence [see above] because it is only in his letters that we can come face to face with the nuances of his thought in this area in which, to his frustration sometimes and to his joy at others, because of his vocation he could not become actively involved.

Of course, throughout our discussion of his thought, reference will be made to other works by Merton, and these will be indicated as they arise. Furthermore, Merton's correspondence will also be drawn upon wherever appropriate in order to clarify our picture. Yet the works referred to above will form the basic focus of our study.

There are still works from Merton's pen which have not as yet been published. The Merton Letters will eventually comprise four volumes. A number of Merton's personal journals cannot be published until twenty-five years after his death. Yet the picture is essentially complete.

## Contemplation

> We ordinarily think of Monks as people who flee what we call "the real world" rather than people who are passionate about encountering reality with a clarity which the world tends to obscure. [9]

> Contemplation is the realization of God in our life, not just realization of an ideal or something partial, but a realization of the whole thing - the realization that we belong totally to him and he has given himself totally to us. [10]

Before he was anything else, Thomas Merton was a Contemplative. It was from this

> vivid awareness of infinite Being at the roots of our own limited being [11]

that his whole life and work proceeded. As a Contemplative, Merton was indeed passionately concerned with 'encountering reality' with a clarity and perspective lacking in most of his contemporaries. Thus his concern for the inward world of personal identity and the outward world of social and political issues converge in a common quest for dis-illusionment. The quest of the Monk is to strip away the illusions obscuring a true vision of reality. In the search for an individual's true identity, the false self with all its delusions is stripped away. In the social-political arena, the ways of a violent and unjust society are exposed for what they are.

The importance of finding one's true identity, of being the person one was created to be, is demonstrated in Merton's own life. For the Monk had what he himself termed [though not in

reference to his own life] the 'heroic humility' to be authentically himself, despite the problems it caused. The question he poses in *New Seeds* is crucial to his understanding of identity:

> How do you expect to arrive at the end of your own journey if you take the road to another man's city ? [12]

The concept of Contemplation is, of course, nothing new to the Church. Merton assures his readers in the Author's Note at the beginning of *New Seeds* that

> We sincerely hope that it does not contain a line that is new to Christian tradition. [13]

Indeed, his self-confessed influences are central to the faith of the Church: the Gospel of Christ, the Rule of St. Benedict, and Catholic tradition. Furthermore, Merton also refers to St. Bernard of Clairvaux and St. John of the Cross as important influences on his own thought. And in retrospect we may suggest that the latter was perhaps the chief Christian source of Merton's thought on Contemplation.

The task of defining Contemplation is not easy. Merton writes in *New Seeds* that

> Contemplation cannot be taught. It can only be hinted at, suggested, pointed to, symbolised. [14]

Indeed, these words reflect the Contemplative's experience of God. For Merton stands within the Apophatic tradition of Pseudo-Dionysius, Eckhart, Ruysbroec, and John of the Cross, which

> holds that God's reality, because it so transcends the world, cannot in principle be described. [15]

Therefore, as we investigate Merton's spirituality of Contemplation, it is important to note that he stands consciously within the Apophatic tradition of Christian spiritualiy, and presents it as a valid spiritual option for our time.

## Identity

In Contemplation we find our true identity, our true self. This process entails a death - that of our 'exterior' self - in order that our true 'interior' self may be born. This 'true' self is rooted in God. Merton refers to St. Paul's confession that

> it is no longer I who live,
> but Christ who lives in me... [16]

Yet for him it is also true that

> Sanctity consists in being myself. [17]

For

> We are ... called to share with God the work of **creating** the truth of our identity. [18]

Merton believes that God is present in all things, but that his presence in men and women is realized only in those who know their true selves. And so there is an important distinction between

God's presence in all as Creator and in some also as Saviour. To be "saved" is therefore

> to return to one's inviolate and eternal reality and to live in God.

It is indeed 'as God discovers Himself in us' that we become Contemplatives. [19]

We are to be the persons God created us to be, otherwise we are claiming to know better than God ! In order to be true to our identity we should focus not on our 'external' self, but rather on our 'internal', true self. Yet much of our human activity suceeds in helping us to run away from our true self, and so to cultivate our false, external self in rejection of God and of other people. In the end, therefore, we will fail to recognise our own true self. Merton writes of 'what it means, among other things, to be judged by Christ', that if you have spent your life running away from God's will and your true self, then you will not be able to

> take your own true name and countenance ... [and] ... will be destroyed by the event [ie the *eschaton*, judgment] that was meant to be your fulfilment. [20]

Merton is concerned to make clear that there is no thought of body - soul dualism here. The essential division is not between body and soul, for the 'true self' involves the whole person - body and soul. The problem is rooted in the Fall:

> Man has become alienated from his inner self which is the Image of God. Man has been turned, spiritually, inside out, so that his ego plays the part of the "person" - a role which it actually has no right to assume. [21]

Therefore, our state is such that

> What we are not seems to be real, what we are seems to be unreal. [22]

The Contemplative is concerned that what we are is that which seems to us to be real. For only then has the individual found her true identity.

The discovery of our true identity involves a death. The 'external self' has to die, and this death we will dread

> in proportion as we are identified with this external self and attached to it. [23]

Contemplation is a costly vocation, and Merton's own struggle with the Gospel story of the Rich Young Man illustrates this. Prior to his entry into Gethsemani, Merton wrote to Catherine Doherty of his continuing struggle:

> Whenever I read about the young rich man ... [who] turned away sad, "because he had many possessions", I feel terrible. I haven't got great possessions, but I have a job, and this ease here [at St. Bonaventure], this safety, and some money in the bank and a pile of books... nothing that the average housemaid or A & P clerk doesn't have, in good times. But I don't feel comfortable at all when I think of that sentence in the Bible. I can't read that and sit still. It makes me very unquiet. [24]

The N.T. speaks of death to sin, and this is what the Contemplative means by death to one's external self. We are each born in sin, with a false self, and a life devoted to that false self

is a life of sin. Sin starts from the assumption that the false self is the 'fundamental reality of life'. [25] Yet because we are each unique, we cannot model ourselves on others. For each one of us has a unique self, a unique identity. Anne Carr writes of Merton's concern for identity, that

> personal identity is the reality of a deep and centred self, which then knows its own experience and can reflect and judge according to its own values.
> [Furthermore] ... this sense ... is a precondition for any responsible and adult spiritual choice in relation to God and to others, especially the choice of monastic life as a response to God's call. [26]

For Merton, St. Augustine's prayer captured his own concern for identity:

> May I know You,
> May I know myself. [27]

And as Merton himself wrote:

> In order to become myself I must cease to be what I always thought I wanted to be, and in order to find myself I must go out of myself, and in order to live I have to die. [28]

## Grace

It is important that our true self, and the finding of it, be regarded as a gift. It is the gift of God, who by Grace completes Nature:

> God ... in His mercy, completes the hidden and mysterious work of creation in us ... by awakening in us the awareness that ... the natural life in us has been completed, elevated, transformed and fulfilled in Christ by the Holy Spirit. [29]

Our true identity is not something which we can discover or attain to through our own efforts. Rather, Merton suggests, the Contemplative is called to 'share' with God the work of creating his own identity. But the initiative is God's, for

> We become Contemplatives
> when God discovers Himself in us. [30]

The full scope of Merton's awareness of the workings of grace is revealed in an October 1965 letter to Linda Sabbath:

> I think that any attempt whatever to sincerely discover a genuine center of meaning for one's life, a center that in some way or other is seen as "superior" to one's empirical, everyday, authentic existence, must have something to do with grace. [31]

Indeed, at the centre of life there can only be grace, for there is God.

## Unity, God, Christ

In a subsequent letter to Linda Sabbath Merton wrote of what he considered to be the essential characteristic of religious faith:

> The great basic thing is remaining united by love with God's will considered as the pure ground and root of everything (not objectified necessarily in some anthropomorphic way.) [32]

An important part of our finding our unique identity is the realisation that the basic reality is not 'our empirical and individual existence' but rather 'being itself'. Merton continues:

> The goal of the Contemplative is, on its lowest level, the recognition of this splendor of being and unity - a splendor in which he is one with all that is. [33]

Because the goal of the Contemplative is unity, Merton rejects the idea that it is necessary to detach oneself from 'things' in order to attach oneself to God. Nothing external to ourselves can become an obstacle to our union with God:

> You have to take God and creatures all together and see God in His creation and creation in God and don't ever separate them. Then everything manifests God instead of hiding God or being in the way of God as an obstacle. [34]

Rather, it is we ourselves who are the problem. We need to

> become detached from **ourselves** in order to see and use all things in and for God. [35] [Merton's emphasis]

For it is only in our detachment from our 'external' selves that we can find our 'internal selves', and thus discover our unity with God and with all creation.

Just as we cannot reject 'things' in favour of God, neither can we reject people. Our identity is not to be found in God by rejecting other people. Rather, the Contemplative is united both with God and with others. Thus, Merton writes:

> I will never be able to find myself if I isolate myself from the rest of mankind as if I were a different kind of being. [36]

Reality is to be found in unity, for the ultimate reality is the unity of all things in God. Therefore, to live in division is to fail to live in reality. For the Contemplative Monk, like Merton, the 'only justification' for such a life of 'deliberate solitude' is

> the conviction that it will help you to love not only God but also other men. [37]

Such is the unity of God and humankind, and human beings one with another, that God loves you through me, and loves me through you. In a fallen world, however, the love that unites also brings suffering. And so, for Merton, as love seeks to realize unity it is like

> the resetting of a body of broken bones. [38]

Contemplation brings recognition of the individual's unity with God and with all creation. And so Merton poses the question as to whether a life of prayer is simply an evasion for one who is aware of this unity. Yet immediately he answers his own question with an affirmation of the monastic life. If the Spirit of God fills the whole earth, he states, then prayer actually keeps us in the world. But, more importantly, it takes us to the centre of the world, to God - the hidden ground of love. [39] This is the Contemplative's 'chief service to the world'. For, as Merton observes, the Contemplative is able to

> listen more intently to the deepest and most neglected voices that proceed from [the world's] inner depth. [40]

It is precisely this 'spiritual contact' which enables the Contemplative to discern so clearly, as did Merton himself, the events of a disunited and superficial world. Again. in Merton's own words:

> In facing the world with a totally different viewpoint [the Contemplative] maintains alive in the world the presence of a spiritual and intelligent consciousness which is the root of true peace and true unity among men. [41]

The 'normal' way into Contemplation, Merton writes in *New Seeds*, is through Christ. It is in Christ that God has chosen to come among us. And in the individual, Christ dwelling in us

> becomes as it were our superior self, for He has united and identifed our inmost self with Himself. [42]

However, Merton is more often concerned with God in his writings. At the centre of all contemplative life and action is God. The role of Christ for the Contemplative would appear to be primarily as the one in whom God is made knowm.

In the first chapter of *New Seeds*, Merton describes Contemplation variously as the 'vivid realisation' that life proceeds from a source, and 'above all' an 'awareness of the reality of that source' [43]; as 'gratitude'; as a 'vivid awareness of infinite Being at the roots of our own limited being; as the

> response to a call ... from Him ... Who speaks in everything that is ...and ... most of all ... in the depths of our own being. [44]

Put most simply and profoundly, Contemplation is response to God.

For Merton, God is both 'hidden Ground of love' and incarnate in Jesus Christ. The final chapter of *New Seeds* speaks of the incarnation as God's call to us to live not as if we were gods ourselves, but rather to live as God did in Jesus Christ - as a human being. [45] Furthermore, it is Christ who keeps the Christian Contemplative rooted in the events of her own time and situation. As Merton wrote in a letter to Sister M. Emmanuel:

> I think at least some Contemplatives must try to understand the providential events of the day. God works in history, therefore a Contemplative who has no sense of history ... of historical responsibility, is not a fully Christian Contemplative: he is gazing at God as a static essence, or as an intellectual light, or as a nameless ground of being ... [However] we must confront [God] in the awful paradoxes of our day... [46]

And so, although the ultimate quest of the Contemplative is union with God, Jesus Christ continues to root her in the reality of the world and of her own true humanity.

## Faith

Faith, for Merton, is no blind urge, feeling, or irrational conviction. Nor is it an opinion. Rather, he describes it as an intellectual assent. Here again, Grace completes Nature, for faith

> perfects the mind, it does not destroy it. It puts the intellect in possession of truth which reason cannot grasp by itself. [47]

Merton does not mean 'knowledge' here when he speaks of faith, for faith does not 'give complete satisfaction to the intellect'. Rather, God reveals himself, and in faith one says "yes" to God, and rests ultimately not in propositions about God, but in God himself. [48] God communicates 'His truth' to us through words, yet in the end surpasses in his being all that can be said or proposed about him. [49]

Because God far surpasses anything that can be said of God, any concept which faith adheres to 'is only a pale analogy'. And so it follows that

> If nothing that can be seen can either be God or represent Him to us as He is, then to find God we must pass beyond everything that can be seen and enter into darkness. [50]

Faith, therefore, leads not to greater light, but to greater darkness. As Merton observes:

> The more perfect faith is, the darker it becomes. [51]

This is the seeming paradox: that the nearer we get to God, the less of God we see. For the images and concepts to which we grasp in faith are 'ultimately misleading'. [52] And so it is as faith enters into darkness that God is most truly near. This movement, like that from our 'external' to our 'internal' self, is a movement from the false to the true - from illusion to reality.

It is here that Merton reveals just how close his thought is to that of St. John of the Cross. As already noted, in *Contemplative Prayer* he discusses John and acknowledges his debt to

him. An earlier work, *The Ascent to Truth*, was devoted entirely to the Carmelite Saint.

Faith, for Merton, begins as intellectual assent. Through human words, concepts, images, the intellect comes to grasp a Truth which is above and beyond all reason. And so faith is distinct from purely rational knowledge. In faith one has said "yes" to God, and thereafter words, images, concepts will fall away until faith rests not in human imaginings about God, but in God. Then, at last, true self and true God meet in pure faith.

## Becoming a Contemplative

The Contemplative is one for whom the experience of "darkness" is most profoundly an experience of God. The metaphor of the "desert" is another way of describing this Contemplative experience of

> emptiness ... when we have left all ways, forgotten ourselves and taken the invisible Christ as our way. [53]

Contemplation cannot, however, be taught or explained. Nor can it be chosen. We cannot make ourselves into Contemplatives. Rather, Contemplation is pure gift. The Contemplative is one who is aware of his utter dependence upon God's grace. As Merton writes in *New Seeds*:

> True faith must be able to go on even when everything else is taken away from us. [54]

But any capacity to do so can only be received. At best, Merton writes:

> We can dispose ourselves for the reception of this great gift by resting in the heart of our own poverty, keeping our soul as far as possible empty of desires for all the things that please and preoccupy our nature, no matter how pure or sublime they may be in themselves. [55]

How then does one become a Contemplative ? Usually it is a gradual process, not a 'sudden flash'. [56] Often the experience is one of encroaching night, of desert. It is difficult to pray; words and images appear to have lost their meaning, or have become distortions. Yet God is making Godself known in precisely the darkness and desert of God's apparent absence, for you come to realise that

> You are going somewhere and that your journey is guided and directed and that you can feel safe. [57]

Other times it is a 'sudden emptying', as words and images go, and clarity and freedom come. Yet other times it is an experience of tranquility in which

> the will rests in a deep, luminous and absorbing experience of love. [58]

These, however, are only beginnings. The next stage in the process sees the disappearance of the boundaries marking the separateness of the self and God. Yet this too is but a beginning

for, as Merton suggests, we are all, always, beginners at Contemplation.

Although it is impossible to make oneself into a Contemplative, [59] it is possible to discern when one has been led into the desert / darkness, and to respond accordingly. Nevertheless, Merton stresses the giveness of 'true contemplation'. It is a 'gift' and a 'grace', and so is to be discovered rather than sought. Therefore, one should simply follow 'ordinary ways of prayer' and receive one's vocation (if such there is) to Contemplative prayer 'in due time'. [60] It is paradoxical, but desire to become a Contemplative is in itself a barrier to true Contemplation. And so, Merton suggests:

> Perhaps the best way to become a contemplative would be to desire with all one's heart to be anything but a contemplative; who knows. [61]

Yet even this suggestion 'is not true either'. It has caught the paradoxical nature of becoming a Contemplative, but has omitted the desire of the Contemplative, which is a 'form of "emptiness"' yet is so 'great that it is incomprehensible'. [62]

## Contemplative Prayer

The vision of Contemplative prayer is not easily put into words. This is so precisely because it is itself an experience

of the total inadequacy of words and images, in which God is present but

> beyond any satisfactory mental representation. [83]

It is an

> experience of being apparently without faith in order to really grow in faith. [84]

In the end it is concerned not with knowing about God, but rather with knowing God himself.

This distinction, between knowing about God and knowing God himself, is the key to Contemplative prayer. Only in transcending all our human analogies, and even our own selves, do we reach God himself. Yet in the end, all is one. God and his creatures are distinct but not separate. This is the Contemplative's perception of reality.

Merton writes that our possession of God is in reality our realisation that we are possessed by him. For this reason he suggests use of the "Prayer of the Heart" as a means of keeping us aware of God's presence and of the fact

> that our very being is penetrated with His knowledge and love for us. [85]

The "Prayer of the Heart" [86] is central to the meditation of the Contemplative, for here is prayer stripped of all its non-essentials.

Here is prayer which acknowledges our utter dependence upon God, and which finds God in silence rather than in human words.

The importance of Contemplation is

> the **contemplative orientation** of the whole life of prayer.

It is

> the contemplative, silent, "empty" and apparently useless element in the life of prayer which makes it truly a **life**. [Merton's emphasis] [67]

Not everyone can be a Contemplative, yet the Contemplative vocation is as necessary for the Church as a whole as for the individuals to whom it is given. And so, whilst the Contemplative way is not a universal norm, as the vocation of the few it is vital to the Church:

> Real contemplatives will always be rare and few. But that is not a matter of importance, as long as the whole Church is predominantly contemplative in all her teaching, all her activity and all her prayer. [68]

Contemplative meditation does not exclude petitionary prayer, but provides the context within which such petitions are offered. Neither is Contemplation an alternative to action, but rather leads to our calling into question

> the whole structure of our spiritual life... [69]

Contemplation, therefore, provides a framework, or basic orientation, for life. And so, it is not so much a question of what we do, but rather of the attitude with which we do it. An example is the

Contemplative's treatment of creation. As Merton's chapter heading in *New Seeds* indicates, for the Contemplative there is no division of creation into the sacred and the secular, for 'Everything That Is, Is Holy'. [70] From this perspective it is not a matter of avoiding what is seen as intrinsically evil, but rather of learning not to abuse God's good gifts. True Contemplation means a desire for 'complete emptiness' and 'total renunciation', and this for Merton will lead to an attitude of Detachment. Detachment is a gift of God, and is one aspect of our dying with Christ. It is cause and fruit of the 'Dark Night' - both preparation for it and end result of it. Detachment, however, is not renunciation. Merton writes of the tension between stability and solidarity, that the Contemplative requires a certain degree of economic security, yet needs also

> *to be able to identify* himself honestly and sincerely with the poor ... because he is really one of them. [71]

The ability to be poor is a visible sign of the Contemplative's attitude of detachment. Yet there are limits. Merton suggests that one cannot be expected to live the Contemplative life if one is always ill or struggling to 'keep body and soul together'. [72]

The formation of the Contemplative always takes place in the context of other people. Deatchment, therefore, is not to be understood as isolation from other people. Merton warns that Christ will not live in us if we cannot in turn find him in others. Indeed, another aspect of our dying with Christ is to see him in the other person. Thus the Monk renounces his own will in order that he may

find God's will through the Abbot. The simplest means of overcoming selfishness and blindness of judgment is obedience to the guidance and judgment of another. The most dangerous person in the world, Merton adds, is the Contemplative who is guided by nobody - who lives without reference to others !

Contemplative prayer is a gift. Sometimes we find ourselves in the spiritual desert and yet wish to remain there. In the desert words may fail us, leading to silence before God. The "Jesus Prayer" epitomises the prayer of the desert, where our aim is not to know about God, but rather to know him and his presence in us. It is not times of profound meditation but a 'contemplative orientation' of the whole of life with which Merton is concerned. Such an orientation reaches its fruition in action.

**Action**

> The more I become identified with God, the more will I be identified with all the others who are identified with Him. His love will live in all of us. His Spirit will be our Life, the Life of all of us and Life of God. And we shall love one another and God with the same love with which He loves us and Himself. This love is God Himself. [73]
>
> In facing the world with a totally different viewpoint [the Contemplative] maintains alive in the world the presence of a spiritual and intelligent consciousness which is the root of true peace and true unity among men. [74]

Contemplation is about unity. The Contemplative finds that there is a unity between herself, God, and other people, and hence that the journey toward God means also, inevitably, a journey

toward other people. Therefore, the **Mystic** and the **Prophet** can indeed be one and the same person, as Merton himself so eloquently demonstrates.

# Theology

## Nature and Grace

The concepts of Nature and Grace are foundational to Roman Catholic theology. Grace is seen as completing Nature. This means that what is given in creation, and subsequently marred by sin, is perfected and fulfilled by the Grace of God operative in Jesus Christ. Hence Merton's concern that the individual find her true self in relationship to God. For the self that God intends us to be is not something totally new, entering into our lives only at salvation, but rather grace enables me to be the person that I was created to be in the beginning. This point is of considerable importance for Merton's thought because it clarifies the relationship between creation and new creation, nature and grace, world and church. That relationship is one of both continuity **and** discontinuity.

Because of this theological framework of nature and grace, Merton can speak of God's presence in all things as creator and yet also more specifically in some as redeemer. Furthermore, in his works of social criticism, Merton often appeals to human reason and conscience, as in the following observation about the Papal Encyclical *Pacem in Terris*:

> It is a reminder to the conscience of every reasonable human being on the face of the earth that each one of us has a strict obligation to work for world peace. [75]

Merton continues by commenting that his own Pax Medal was awarded for merely affirming 'obvious and commonsense truths'. [76]

For Catholic theology, nature provides a common ground between church and world. And so, for example, Pope John can base his call for peace on the shared moral ground of the natural law - that which everybody knows instinctively to be right. However, Merton is careful to point out, in a number of places throughout his writings, that it is not nature as such (ie the given creation, pronounced by God to be 'good') which is in need of grace, but nature as fallen. Grace is

> opposed only to the limitations, to the deficiencies, to the weaknesses of nature... [77]

Merton refers to this as a misuse of natural law, whereby it is cited in order to justify actions and attitudes which are "natural" to fallen humanity, [78] in a letter to *Catholic Worker* founder Dorothy Day dated December 1961. In the letter, Merton writes of the Sermon on the Mount as calling for a

> **restoration** of human nature. [79]

The Sermon, he suggests, is not to be seen as contradicting natural law, but rather as pointing to human nature as it was before the Fall. Hence, for Merton

> this concept of nature is only comprehensible when we see that it presupposes grace. [80]

In his brief discussion of Matthew 5: 21 - 26, Merton adds that

> it is to my way of thinking more natural, more in accord with the nature of man, to be non-violent ... etc. But we cannot recover this fullness of nature without the grace of God. [81]

The Sermon, therefore, points to nature as it was created to be. Yet because of sin, no one lives of themselves in this way. Instead, we live contrary to our true nature, and

> our contradiction with ourselves makes us realise that without grace we are lost and condemned to a sub-natural law. [82]

Due to the limitations and deficiencies of nature, brought about by sin, the individual builds up a false identity for himself. Grace delivers us from that false self.

## Image and Likeness

For Merton, humanity's creation in the image and likeness of God means that human beings were created to be contemplatives. Thus were the first man and woman created, and thus

> in the plan of God, was to have been our own condition. [83]

The image of God, concludes Merton, is the

> summit of spiritual consciouness in man. [84]

This summit, however, is not attained by reflection on our 'actual, present self', but rather by being

> delivered by grace, virtue and asceticism

from our false, illusory "self". [85]

Thus, to find the image of God within us is to find our true self. Such a discovery is a gift of grace. And so, in the same way as nature and grace, the idea that humanity is created in the image and likeness of God expresses for Catholic theology the essential continuity between the human and the Christian. Despite human sin the image of God is present, albeit marred, in all human beings.

## Action and Contemplation

In an interesting and creative section of *The New Man*, entitled 'Free Speech', Merton refers in more detail to the original state of humanity. 'Free Speech' is Merton's translation of a Greek word *parrhesia*, used at times by the Greek Fathers in referring to Adam's original state. What Merton seeks to express by the term is the

> concept of man's intimacy with God in work as well as in contemplation. [86]

Therefore, Merton claims that in Adam both action and contemplation were combined. For this reason we do not have to choose whether the essence of the divine image is to be found in our being co-creators with God, or in our being contemplatives. The image is manifested in both. Even Adam's work in the Garden of Eden

> had an essentially contemplative character, since it was emtirely impregnated with light and significance by his union with God. [87]

However, this integration of contemplation with the whole of life is not lost forever, despite the effects of human sin. Merton writes of the recovery of *parrhesia* through Jesus, that according to the Gospels those with whom

> He seeks to talk familiarly, because He loves them and wants to make them His friends, are precisely the sinners ! [88]

This is 'Free Speech' - Jesus talking with sinners ! And our own renewed communion with God, through Jesus, is even greater than Adam's was in the beginning - because it implies our pardon.

Much of Merton's later work, on social issues of his time, is devoted to the integration of the active and contemplative impulses both of which he found within himself. This concern no doubt arose in large part from the theological basis outlined here, and further unpacked elsewhere in *The New Man*.

## Sin

> All mankind fell and was shattered with Adam, and the pieces of the great broken image that was meant to mirror God in man's society can only be brought together again in Him Who is our peace, bringing the divided fragments into unity. [89]

The root of the fall is summed up for Merton in one word: pride. [90] Motivated by his desire to possess a knowledge of evil, Adam succeeded in knowing evil

> in a way in which it was not even known by God: that is to say, by **experience**. [91]

Yet

> it was metaphysically impossible for him to increase his experience of the good by adding to it an experience of evil. In desiring what seemed to him to be more, he reached out for what was, in fact, disastrously less. ... And he lost his inheritance, which was the free possession of all good, as a son of God. He tasted and saw that evil was terrible. And he hated himself for it. [92]

In his desire to experience evil for himself, Adam cut himself off from God, his own self, and reality. This is to live in illusion, and what is necessary to counter the illusion is a reversal of the fall. Thus, in the same way that Adam put his own self between himself and God, so the God-man Christ reverses the fall as he stands as mediator between humanity and God.

## Recapitulation

> The word...by whom all things were made, in the fullness of time, to recapitulate and contain all things became man in order to destroy death, to manifest life, and to restore the union between God and man. [Irenaeus of Lyons] [93]

The basic framework of Merton's theology, as expounded in *The New Man*, is threefold. First, there is original unity in Adam. Second, there is the loss of that unity in the fall. Third, there is the restoration of unity in Christ. Although Merton only uses the word once in his discussion in *The New Man*, the Irenaean concept of 'Recapitulation' characterises his thought throughout. This concept, found in embryonic form in the New Testament letters to the Colossians and Ephesians, forms the framework of Merton's theology and spirituality.

The end and aim of Recapitulation is a return to unity. This unity, which is God's intention for all creation, begins here and now to be a reality in the Church. For it is in the Church that the unity, which is the potential of all, has begun to be realized [in both active and passive senses of the word]. Recapitulation is therefore a return to Eden, albeit a changed Eden, but nevertheless a return by grace to that *parrhesia* [and better] which was given by God to humanity in creation, and which is still the yearning of human nature even in its fallen state. Recapitulation sets forth Jesus Christ - the true image of God - as model for humanity, rather than Adam, who is but an image of an image. Thus

the work of Christ is seen as the fulfillment of humanity in truly human existence.

### Life in Christ

> In the beginning, Adam was "one man". The Fall had divided him into "a multitude". Christ has restored man to unity in Himself. The Mystical Christ was the "New Adam" and in Him all men could return to unity, to innocence, to purity, and become "one man". This meant, of course, living not by one's own will ... but being "one spirit" with Christ. ... Union with Christ means unity in Christ, so that each one who is in Christ can say with Paul: "It is now not I that live but Christ that lives in me." It is the same Christ who lives in all ... the same who is "all in all". [94]

For the individual, the key to finding her true self is to live in perfect unity with God. Living in unity with God, we become conformed to the image of God in Jesus Christ, which is our true self. Strictly speaking, this is a paradox. The fact that I am most perfectly myself when it is not I that lives, but Christ who lives in me, defies human logic and reason. Merton attempts an explanation:

> Christ living in me is at the same time Himself and myself. From the moment that I am united to Him "in one spirit" there is no longer any contradiction implied by the fact that we are different persons. He remains, naturally and physically, the Son of God who was born of the blessed virgin in Nazareth... I remain the singular person that I am. But mystically and spiritually Christ lives in me... Christ mystically identifies His members with Himself by giving them His Holy Spirit. [95]

To know ourselves fully, we must know Christ. Yet to know Christ, we

> must know the Father, for Christ is the image of the Father. ... Our identity] is the identity of a son of the Father. [96]

Therefore

> The beginning of self-realization in the fullest Christian sense is ... sharing in the orientation which directs Christ, as Word, entirely to His Father. [97]

Yet again, it is

> Jesus Himself living within us by His Spirit

who is 'our Rule of Life', and it is our obedience to Him which

> perfects the divine image in us [as it] conforms us to Him as a Person. [98]

The 'New Man' is brought into existence by 'faith completed by Baptism'. Baptism, therefore, marks the beginning of the new life in Christ. And so, writes Merton, the process of justification

> means litle if it does not bring with it the healing and restoration of the divine likeness in us. [99]

However, life in Christ is still a struggle. We have constantly to struggle in order to live out spontaneously our true identity in Christ. Yet we are aided by our participation in the Liturgy of the Church, and Merton concludes his book on *The New Man* with a consideration of the Liturgy. The work closes with a reflection on the Easter Sunday evening *Exsultet*:

> the night of inertia, anguish and ignorance ... has become a "truly blessed night" ... which alone knew the time and the hour in which Christ rose out of hell. And here we come face to face with the existentialism of the Paschal Vigil ... of the "apophatic" tradition: which contemplates spiritual realities not in light, not under clear objective forms, but

> in darkness, without form and without figure, apprehended only in the intimacy of the most personal and incommunicable experience... [100]
>
> The night of faith has brought us into contact with the Object of all faith, not as an object but as a Person Who is the centre and life of our own being, at once His own transcendent self and the immanent source of our own identity and life. [101]

**Incarnation**

The incarnation of the Word in the human being Jesus of Nazareth is central to Merton's theology. Therefore, brief discussion of his essay 'Basic Principles of Monastic Spirituality' is necessary here in order to complete the picture presented by *The New Man*.

In the essay, Merton writes of the

> sacred humanity of Christ reigning and active in heaven, [as] a **permanent principle** of sanctification, spiritualising all that is brought in contact with Him by His Church. [102] [Merton's emphasis]

Thus Merton claims that in the monastic community, and indeed in the whole Church, the world is confronted with Jesus Christ.

Another implication of the incarnation is the fact that nature is now 'no obstacle to our contact' with Christ. As Christ incarnate is the crown of all creation, so

> we must be able to see Him in the created things around us. [103]

And so the possibility of sacraments is opened up.

The Word was made flesh, and because of this Christ is forever present in creation, and supremely present in his Church and, specifically, in the monastic community. This also has significance for Christian ethics. As Merton writes:

> To have a truly spiritual life is ... to think and love and act not just as Christ **would** act in a given situation, but as He precisely **does** act, by His grace, in us, at the moment. It is to live and act with the mind of the Church, which [as His Body] is the mind of Christ. [104] [Merton's emphasis]

## The Church

Despite the indescribability of the Contemplative experience, it has to be communicated, and the only tools for its communication are those of the Church. Thus the institutional Church is important, because it is within the Church that 'the living Tradition of Catholicism' is to be found. [105] Nevertheless, the Church presents us with a paradox, for it is an institution which is both

> essentially traditional and essentially revolutionary. [106]

### Correspondence with Rosemary Ruether

Merton's 1967 correspondence with the lay Catholic theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether is instructive in any attempt to understand his personal feelings toward the institutional Church during the latter years of his life. The correspondence reveals a Monk who has no problems with his vocation as long as he can fulfill it according to his own understanding of its nature and meaning. Thus, despite the fact that

> everyone knows where my real "community" is... [107]

Merton is convinced that he should remain a monk. For the monastic vocation represents a movement towards the recapitulation of all creation in Christ:

> the real purpose of asceticism is not cutting off one's relation to created things and other people, but normalising and healing it.

The Contemplative life is

> simply the restoration of man, in Christ, to the state in which he was originally intended to live.

And so, here and now, the monk

> is supposed to be living the life of the new creatioin in which the right relation to all the rest of God's creatures is fully restored. [108]

Merton is, however, very much aware that the monastic vocation, as it is at present institutionalised, does not foster the spirituality which it is supposed to embody. And so, he tells Ruether, he sees himself through his talks to the novices as in a constructive way

> subtly infecting the monastery with worldly ideas. [109]

## Monastic Renewal

The essay 'Monastic Renewal: Problems and Prospects' presents Merton's thoughts on his vocation, and displays much the same basic thrust as his earlier writings on the same theme.

Firstly, the monk is one who is **liberated** from a specific task and from certain concerns in order to be 'dedicated completely to love', both for God and for other people. [110]

Secondly, the monk is a Christian who is **mature** enough to live without the support and consolation of family, job, ambition, social position, even missionary task. The monk is one who is mature enough to devote his freedom to God and other people without even the framework of a misionary apostolate to define his responsibilities in the exercise of his love. Indeed, the monk

> is important more for what he is than for what he does ... "Being" always takes precedence over "doing" and "having". [111]

This is true of every Christian, but the unique contribution of the monk makes it imperative that his essential vocation to contemplation is not obscured by the demands of an apostolate. Therefore, Merton writes, the monk

> is not defined by his task, his usefulness ... his mission is not to **do** this or that job but to **be** a man of God. [112]

For

> The monk is just an ordinary Christian who lives, in the Monastery, the ordinary Christian life ... to the full. He puts aside everything else ... in order to **be** a Christian. [113]

Thirdly, the monastic life has a **prophetic** character. The monk lives as one called to withdraw **from** the world **for the sake** of the world. Thus Merton writes of the monastic life, that it

> must maintain this prophetic seriousness, this wilderness perspective, this mistrust of any shallow optimism which overlooks the ambiguity and the potential tragedy of "the world" in its response to the Word. [114]

Fourthly, the monastic vocation is a *charism*. It is a gift of God's grace. For Merton, the monastic life of contemplation is a return to the union with God for which we were created. The monk discards the 'baggage' of 'vain concerns' in order to devote himself to the one thing he wants and which is really necessary - the quest for meaning, love, identity, peace. [115]

However, the monastic life is lived out in an institution. Here the monk is sworn to obedience, and takes on certain restrictions to his freedom. Therefore, ideals and institution come into conflict. There is a particular tension between the ideal of the monastic life as a *charism* and the reality of its institutional embodiment . This tension was to preoccupy Merton throughout his final years.

## Identity and 'Final Integration'

During the final years of his life, Merton became increasingly troubled by the tension inherent in his vocation. As a contemplative he believed passionately in finding and realizing his true identity. Yet as one who by his monastic vows was sworn to obedience, he had by his very choice of vocation placed certain limits on his freedom, and decided in advance on certain questions relating

to his identity. Thus, for example, marriage was precluded whilst he remained a monk. And so Merton writes in *Contemplation in a World of Action* of the problem which arises when the monastic virtues of 'humility and obedience' are taken as meaning

> the complete abdication of one's personal autonomy and dignity. [116]

There is a fine balance to be achieved here. On the one hand, as Merton points out

> our first task is to be fully human... [117]

The monastic life must affirm basic human values such as integrity, inner peace, authenticity, inner depth, spiritual joy, the capacity to love, and the capacity to enjoy God's creation and give thanks. These are to be affirmed and consecrated to God. Yet discipline and obedience are important also. The monk obeys, writes Merton,

> because he is a disciple of Christ. [118]

Despite his call to be fully human, the monk has to detach himself from certain aspects of his humanity where the controlling factor is his external self. He will undergo a 'crucifixion' - a death - to his false self in order to find his true human identity in union with God. Discipline, therefore, will mean liberation from, or control of, 'physical need'. It will mean the development of humility and detachment through the vows of poverty and obedience. Indeed, the very

> decision to obey is not an abdication of freedom but a mature use of freedom. [119]

In Merton's own life the tension in his vocation came to a head both in his writing [especially that on social issues], and in his love for Margie Smith. In words it is captured in a passage in *Contemplation in a World of Action* where he writes of how the monastic vows

> should deliver the Monk from fixation upon the partial, the limited, the provisional...

and then continues

> But at the same time I am convinced that a monastic life without vows is quite possible and perhaps very desirable. [120]

Such is the seriousness with which Merton believes the monastic vocation to be a *charism* and not an institiution that he can venture the possibility of a monasticism without the institutional framework of vows.

In the end, the aim of the monastic community should be the development of the fully integrated person. [121] Such a person is marked by the following characteristics:

> Firstly, she sees life in the context of God.
>
> Secondly, she is aware of her essential solidarity with humanity.
>
> Thirdly, she is free to be guided by will, reason, and by "spontaneous behavior subject to dynamic insight".
>
> Fourthly, she is no longer limited by her own culture.

Fifthly, she

> has a unified vision and experience of the one truth shining out in all its various manifestations, some clearer than others, some more definite and more certain than others. [122]

This kind of maturity, writes Merton,

> is exactly what the monastic life should produce.

Yet, unfortunately, monastic institutions are not prepared for 'too many people' to develop in this way, and so there is a

> kind of neutralisation of Spirit by organisation. [123]

Yet Merton is being true to the monastic tradition in his concern for maturity and 'final integration'. Writing of the importance of the monk's 'universality of vision', he refers to St. Benedict [124], and then makes reference to St. John of the Cross as he writes of the process of 'final integration':

> Seen from the viewpoint of monastic tradition, the pattern of disintegration, existential moratorium and reintegration on a higher, universal level, is precisely what the monastic life is meant to provide. [125]

## Other Religions

> The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions. She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachingswhich, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.
>
> Second Vatican Council:
> *Declaration on Non Christian Religions* [126]

Merton's views on other religious traditions are consistent with his theological beliefs and his contemplative spirituality. The monk saw himself as called to be a fellow-traveller:

> I believe my vocation is essentially that of a pilgrim and an exile in life, that I have no proper place in this world but that for that reason I am in some sense to be the friend and brother of people everywhere, especially those who are exiles and pilgrims like myself. [127]

In theological terms, some form of universalism is almost inevitable given the acceptance of a theology of recapitulation. For just as 'all things' were created through Christ, so too 'all things' will be completed in Christ. Merton's thought, therefore, is thoroughly anti-dualistic. A modern Catholic writer sets forth a conclusion which would no doubt have been shared by Merton:

> We can conclude by saying that Christ is seen as the origin, center, and destiny of the various religions, as the one who brought them to birth, takes them up, purifies them, and fulfills them in order to take them to their eschatological goal, so that "God may be all in all" (1 Cor. 15: 28...). [128]

Yet it was also Merton's vocation as a monk and as a contemplative which made him aware of the common ground shared by the various religious traditions. For the monk, and specifically the contemplative, is concerned to penetrate to the God beyond all human images and conceptions, and thus to the one God who is 'Creator and Ruler of the universe'. [129] Merton draws on the mysticism of the fourteenth century Rhenish and Flemish mystics in another letter to the Sufist scholar, where he writes of their concept of

> the "Godhead" beyond "God" ... am ascent to perfect and ultimate unity beyond the triad in unity of the Persons. [130]

Merton's apophatic spirituality again emerges in his correspondence with Indian scholar Amiya Chakravarty, when he writes of their common religious experience:

> I do really have the feeling that you [Chakravarty, his colleagues, and his students] have all understood and shared quite perfectly. That you have seen something that I see to be most precious - and most available too. The reality that is present to us and in us: call it Being, call it atman, call it Pneuma ... or Silence. And the simple fact that by being attentive, by learning to listen (or recovering the natural capacity to listen which cannot be learned any more than breathing), we can find ourselves engulfed in such happiness that it cannot be explained: the happiness of being at one with everything in that hidden ground of Love for which there can be no explanations. [131]

Of course, the person of Jesus Christ can be an obstacle to Christians interested in inter-religious dialogue. For Merton, however, of ultimate importance is the one God who is beyond even the trinitarian concepts of Christianity. In a letter to an Indian student, he wrote of the importance of a meeting of the 'great religious philosophies' to

clarify the basic truths which they all hold together. [132]

On the the question as to the salvation of followers of non Christian religions, Merton simply states that all who believe in

> one God who is the Father of all and who wills all to be saved, will certainly be saved if they do His will ... even though ... [they] may not subjectively be able to accept all that the Church teaches about Christ. [133]

In the end it is grace which transforms a human quest for God into a divine revelation. The importance which Merton attributes to the grace of God goes hand in hand with his openness to other religions. In his own words:

> I repeat my conviction as a Catholic that the Holy Spirit may perfectly well be more active in the heart of a Hindu monk than in my own. [134]

Such is grace. [135]

# Social Criticism

Before entering Gethsemani, Merton was for a time a member of the Communist Party. Immediately prior to his entry into the monastery, the young Catholic was strongly attracted to the work of Catherine Doherty with New York's poor, yet he chose instead to enter Gethsemani. By his own admission, the first fifteen years or so in the monastery were years of illusion that he was somehow relieved of responsibility for the world.

The so-called Louisville experience [referred to in the Biographical section] marks a change in Merton's attitude toward the outside world, yet is actually a return to previously held views. Therefore, we can suggest that the Social Critic was always a part of Merton's identity, stifled however by his initial enthusiasm for the monastic vocation, and indeed by the monastic institution itself.

The true contemplative is of necessity a social critic, if only by implication, because of his very lifestyle. But for Merton, his vocation came increasingly to demand more active and public social criticism.

## The Unmasking of an Illusion

At the centre of Merton's social criticism is the idea of dis-illusionment. This parallels the monk's concern, at an

individual level, for Identity. Merton himself uses the phrase in one of the essays making up the collection *Contemplation in a World of Action*, where he writes of the meaning of monastic *contemptus mundi*, that it is

> not the rejection of a reality, but the unmasking of an illusion. [136]

This is a fitting description of Merton's attitude to society, and of the intention of his social criticism.

The contemplative is in a particular position to address the illusions of both society and the individual because at the heart of contemplation is a sense of connectedness to God - the source of all reality. And so the goal of the contemplative is the unmasking of the illusion which prevents the realisation of the individual's true identity, and indeed the fulfilment of the world, in Christ. For the contemplative, illusion is sin - that which prevents individuals and the world from becoming that which they were created to be.

The role of the contemplative, therefore, is essentially passive. He is concerned with clarifying, protesting, demystifying - but not directly with transforming. Nevertheless, the activists need the contemplatives to give them direction and focus.

Merton's concern with the illusions of his time is apparent throughout his writings on peace and justice themes. There are four main areas of concern.

Firstly, there are a cluster of illusions around the issue of war and violence. Violence, writes Merton

> rests on the assumption that the enemy and I are entirely different: the enemy is evil and I am good. The enemy must be destroyed and I must be saved.

However

> love sees things differently. [137]

Secondly, there are illusions about nonviolence. these Merton addresses in his essay 'Non Violence and the Christian Conscience', where he writes:

> There exists in the American mind today an image of non-violence which is largely negative and completely inadequate. [138]

The root cause of the myth that nonviolence is at best

> an unhealthy kind of idealism

and at worst

> purely and simply a tool of communist deceit

is the fact that

> nonviolence is based on principles which call into question the popular self-understanding of the society in which we live. [139]

However, as Merton points out, it is nonviolence - and not violence - which claims

> to be a genuine fulfillment and implementation

of the ideals of democratic society and of Christianity. [140]

Thirdly, protest itself is not immune from sharing the illusions of the society against which it is aimed. In answer to the question 'What is the object of protest ?', Merton writes: [141]

> What is needed is a constructive dissent that recalls people to their senses, makes them think deeply, plants in them a seed of change, and awakens in them the profound need for truth, reason and peace which is implanted in man's nature.

At the root of the the illusion afflicting nonviolent protest is a concern for power. In what may be his last writing on social criticism, Merton writes that 'spurious' nonviolence is

> a different method of expressing one's will to power. [142]

Yet nonviolence is not about power, but truth. Furthermore:

> It is not pragmatic but prophetic. It is not aimed at immediate political results, but at the manifestation of fundamental and crucially important truths... It is aimed not so much at revolution as at conversion. [143]

The problem with anti-war protest is that it may in fact reinforce the myth of force. And so one has to question one's motives - is our aim to bring about new attitudes toward war, or is protest simply an outlet for frustration and indignation ? This

concern about motives is expressed by Merton in a letter to Jim Forest, where he observes:

> The thing this Vietnam war is proving is that this whole country is rotten with violence and hate and frustration and this means the peaceniks as much as anybody else. [144]

Merton's concern in this area is further demonstrated by his unease over the self-immolation of Catholic peace protester Roger la Porte in 1965. Immediately upon hearing of la Porte's act, Merton contacted the Catholic Peace Fellowship in order to have his name removed from their list of sponsors. Here was an act of protest which the monk could not accept, yet which he feared he would be seen as endorsing if he continued as a C.P.F. sponsor. However, a statement was issued by the C.P.F. clarifying Merton's position in relation to the actions of their members, and he remained a sponsor. Writing to John C. Heidbrink after things had died down, Merton was concerned not to condemn la Porte

> wrong as I think his act objectively was

but rather to condemn what he saw as a

> pervasive ... spirit of irrationality, of power-seeking, of temptation to the wrong kind of refusal and impatience and to pseudo-charismatic witness which can be terribly, fatally destructive of all good. [145]

It is also apparent that Merton was uneasy about some forms of symbolic protest which damaged property even while taking care not to risk human life. In a letter to Jim Forest written

nearly a year earlier than the one cited above, Merton writes of the importance of not coming out

> with some gesture that strikes the average Catholic as a needless provocation and drives him back into the arms of conservatism and inertia. [146]

Later, Merton clarified what he meant by the word 'provocation' - such are

> actions that have an aggressive, challenging nature **over and above** the simple question of conscience that is involved. [147] [Merton's emphasis]

Fourthly, and finally, Merton finds parallels between the situation in Nazi Germany and that of the 1960s which powerfully bring home to his readers their own illusions. The early 60s saw the trial in Jerusalem of Adolf Eichmann. Eichmann, we are told, was manifestly sane. His horrific work, Merton writes, was

> daily monotonous work for the fatherland ... It all came under the heading of duty, self-sacrifice, and obedience.

Indeed, it is the sane people who are the most dangerous, for

> they will have **perfectly good reasons**, logical, well adjusted reasons, for firing the shot. [148] [Merton's emphasis]

This was the case in Hitler's Germany, and it is the case now with the Bomb. As Merton observes of humanity:

> If he were a little less sane, a little more aware of his absurdities and contradictions, perhaps there might be a possibility of his survival. But if he is sane, too sane... perhaps we must say that in a society like ours the worst insanity is to be totally without anxiety, totally "sane".[149]

What is probably one of Merton's most comprehensive considerations of this theme of dis-illusionment is to be found in the essay 'Events and Pseudo Events: Letter to a Southern Churchman'. Here Merton expresses his mistrust of what he calls an

> obsession with declarations and pronouncements [150]

and explains his decision no longer to comment on current events. Yet the monk admits that he

> cannot help being implicated [151]

in the events going on around him, and goes on to offer a radical critique of society. The contemplative, he writes, will concern himself with the same problems as others, but will look for

> the spiritual and metaphysical roots of these problems - not by analysis but by simplicity. [152]

This Merton seeks to do in his 'Letter'.

The monk's simplicity consists, for Merton, in his freedom from the whole machinery of illusion-making. The world is curved in upon itself, and the resulting 'closed system' is one of servitude:

> It is in this confusion of images and myths, superstitions and ideologies that the "powers of the air" govern our thinking - even our thinking about religion ! [153]

Merton uses the Latin word *simulacrum* [Eng. deceptive, phony; cf. Vulgate translation of I John: Eng. 'idols'; 'a fine word for

something monumentally phony' [154] to describe the media image of his contemporaries as

> fair, objective, practical and humane. [155]

Such is our illusory image of ourselves, that all we do proceeds from minds that are

> full of myths, distortions, half-truths, prejudices, evasions, illusions, lies... [156]

It is not surprising therefore, as Merton observes elsewhere, that the same principle behind Auschwitz and the American frontier lies behind Vietnam and the Bomb, namely that:

> Anyone belonging to class x or nation y or race z is to be regarded as subhuman and worthless, and consequently has no right to exist. [157]

Furthermore, the principle is self-reinforcing. 'Pseudo events' are perpetrated which strengthen one's perceived position - what Merton refers to as 'justification by snake-handling'. [158] Examples of these are the Berlin airlift and the Cuban missile crisis. Even in the protest movement there is the danger that

> **we abandon communication in order to celebrate our own favorite group-myths in a ritual pseudo-event** [Merton's emphasis] [159]

In the end, one's illusions are such that

> **one is quarantined from the ordinary world of right and wrong** [Merton's emphasis] [160]

Living in this world of slogans and pseudo-events, the Church has

> an obligation **not** to join in [but rather] to cut clear through the deviousness and ambiguity of both slogans and events by her simplicity and her love. [161]

For in the end it is love, and not the promulgation of its own views, which is to be the task of the Church.

The theme of dis-illusionment is particularly important in understanding Merton's social criticism because it represents the unique contribution of the contemplative. Merton's concern for the protest movements of his time was that they avoid duplicating the illusions of their society, for protest is not concerned with adding to the stock of illusion, but rather with the manifestation of truth. The means are important, therefore, because a protest against the violence of war, which itself manifests violence rather than love, contradicts its own message.

Against the backdrop of the contemplative concern with dis-illusionment, we now turn, more specifically, to a consideration of Merton's views on violence and nonviolence.

## War - The Bomb and Vietnam

It is difficult to state categorically Merton's position regarding war. He was not a pacifist, but would probably be more accurately described as what we would today call a 'nuclear pacifist'. Yet these subtle distinctions are largely irrelevant because of Merton's own admission that

> for himself, he would not consider it licit for him as a monk to kill another human being even in self-defense. [162]

Elsewhere, in a letter to Catholic pacifist Dorothy Day, Merton writes that

> ... It is true that I am not theoretically a pacifist. That only means that I do not hold that a Christian **may not** fight, and that a war **cannot** be just. I hold that there is such a thing as a just war, even today there can be such a thing, and I think the Church holds it. But on the other hand I think that it is pure theory and that in practise all the wars that are going around, whether with conventional weapons, or guerilla wars, or the cold war itself, are shot through with evil, falsity, injustice, and sin so much that one can only with difficulty extricate the truths that may be found here and there in the "causes" for which the fighting is going on. So in practise I am with you, except insofar only, as a policy of totally uncompromising pacifism may tend in effect to defeat itself and yield to one of the other forms of injustice. And I think that your position has an immense importance as a symbolic statement that is irreplaceable and utterly necessary. I also think that it is a scandal that most Christians are not solidly lined up with you. I certainly am. [163] [Merton's emphasis]

We therefore approach Merton's writings on the subject of war aware that his position is ambiguous. The reason for his ambiguity may have been a concern to keep to the mainstream of Catholic teaching on war (which is not pacifist) whilst also remaining

true to his own (pacifist) inclinations. Certainly, as Zahn makes clear, Merton regarded his monastic vocation as ruling out any use of violence on his own part. And such a position is perfectly legitimate, being grounded in Catholic tradition. However, the main thrust of Merton's teachings on war and violence is not so much **Pacifism** as **Peacemaking**. He saw this as central to his own calling, as when he wrote that:

> The Monk is above all else a peacemaker. [164]

Into a situation of despair as to the possibility of avoiding war, Merton brings a basic optimism about human nature. Violence is built upon the assumption that the enemy is 'entirely different', indeed 'evil', and that we by contrast are 'good'. Hence, the enemy must be destroyed, and we must be saved. Love, however, sees things differently. **War is our** enemy, and furthermore, is built upon an illusion that must be unmasked. Not only is Merton optimistic about human nature, but he is also aware that pessimism can be self-fulfilling. If we are convinced that another world war is bound to occur, this will form our attitudes toward the enemy, and will actually make conflict more probable.

The enemy, therefore, is war itself. Thus, in his statement for the anthology *Authors Take Sides On Vietnam*, Merton wrote that he took sides not with the U.S.A. or with Communism, but rather with

> the people who are sick of war and want peace in order to rebuild their country. [165]

Yet Merton at times indicates that - at least in theory - a limited nuclear exchange could be permissible. For, as we have seen, he maintained a position that held that war could be the legitimate and responsible option. This reinforces our description of Merton as peacemaker rather than pacifist. The peacemaker, unlike the pacifist, is concerned not just with defending principles, but is able to enter into a discussion as to the most Christian way to bring peace to a particular situation. And, at least in theory, that way could be through violence. For Merton, that is not the case for the East/West situation, nor for Vietnam. In the former, it is the magnitude and injustice of a nuclear exchange which rules out violence. In the latter, it is the whole conduct and intention of the war which renders it unjustifiable. [166] But, true to the Just War Theory, Merton does not rule out violence in principle from the outset.

**Non Violence**

> My position is on the Christian non-violent left, particularly that segment of it which is occupied by Dorothy Day, the Catholic Peace fellowship and people like Joan Baez. We are not liberals. We are still, I suppose, Christian anarchists, except that the term has no political relevance whatsoever. But the Christian anarchist remains - unlike the liberal - clearly non-identified with established disorder. In so doing, he may exasperate everyone, but perhaps sometimes he may see an opening toward peace and love even when the sulphur and brimstone are at their worst, and others have given up trusting in anything except weapons. [167]

Merton's understanding of nonviolence begins with the recognition that violence begins with unjust structures. In his essay 'Toward A Theology of Resistance', Merton writes of the

> more abstract, more global, more organised presence of violence on a massive and corporate pattern. [168]

Furthermore, he adds [169]

> Violence today is **white-collar violence, the systematically organised bureaucratic and technological destruction of man.** [Merton's emphasis]

Faced with the prior existence of violence in the form of unjust structures, a theology of resistance will, Merton suggests, emphasise reason and communication rather than force. However, such a theology will admit

> the possibility of force in a limit-situation when everything else fails. [170]

Certainly Merton is not prepared to impose nonviolence on the oppressed. Of the African-American he writes:

> I do not go along with violence, but I do not recognise the slightest right to impose non-violence on the Negro. It is up to him to choose his own policies. [171]

One concrete example of nonviolent protest which Merton presents is that of the people of wartime Denmark. their anti-Nazi resistance was accomplished

> **simply by unanimously and effectively expressing in word and action the force of their deeply held moral convictions.** [172] [Merton's emphasis]

These convictions, Merton notes, were nothing heroic or sublime. They were merely ordinary. Thus, he concludes, nonviolent action

> becomes possible where fundamental truths are taken seriously. [173]

However, nonviolence can become merely another expression of will-to-power. Merton is aware of this danger when he writes that nonviolence

> is not for power but for truth ... is not pragmatic but prophetic. [174]

And so the monk can write in a letter to peace activist Jim Forest:

> ... do not depend on the hope of results. When you are doing the sort of work you have taken on ... you may face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and evn achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself ... gradually you struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people. [175]

The principles of nonviolence, for Merton, are centred around respect for the rights of the opponent. Nonviolent action is a way of insisting upon one's own rights without violating the rights of the other person / group of people. Merton is rigorous in his adherence to this principle, as is evident for example in his caution as to the extent to which even damage to property can be considered nonviolent. [176]

## Theological Principles

Why was Merton concerned with peacemaking ? There are a number of motives, and apparent motives, behind Merton's concern for peacemaking.

Firstly, he believed that his vocation as a monk meant that for him personally violence was not an option.

Secondly, Merton believed that the unity of the Church in Jesus Christ meant that

> The Christian ... has the obligation to treat every other man as Christ Himself... [177]

War, by contrast, belongs to the realm of the the old life of division and conflict rather than to the new life in Christ.

Thirdly, Merton is concerned to express his belief that he is saying nothing which has not already been said by Pope John [in *Pacem in Terris*], and earlier by the Church fathers, and indeed by the Gospels themselves. [178]

It is clear, however, that the major motivating factor behind Merton's concern with peacemaking is his spirituality. The contemplative vision of the ultimate unity of all things inevitably led him to a commitment to peacemaking as he sought to enable that

unity to become a reality here and now. Thus nonviolence is itself an end, and not merely the means to some ethical goal.

# A Summing Up

Thomas Merton was a Contemplative, and the inspiration for his thought in its various areas of interest flows from the contemplative vision. In many ways his thought is simple - being rooted in the Contemplative's awareness of the unity of all creation in God, and in his concern to break through to that reality both in terms of individual and social dis-illusionment.

Theologically, Merton is concerned to emphasise the continuity between Creation and New Creation. The work of Christ does not reject or deny creation but rather completes and fulfills it. For human beings were created in the image of Christ. Hence, the Church is [or at least should be] a living sign of God's intention for the world - here are men and women beginning to live as they were created to live - and more! Yet such is so often not the case.

Merton is aware that much even of the Christian enterprise operates on the basis of the illusions shared by its time and culture. And so he is at times concerned that the Church become aware of how its own institutions are fostering unreality and illusion, rather than reality. Indeed, as a Contemplative Merton believed that he had much in common with fellow Contemplatives from other religious traditions, for they shared a common vision of what is real and ultimately important - namely, that all is one in God - and a common concern that their vision be shared with the world. Merton

therefore increasingly found himself involved, both through correspondence and in his own work, with representatives of other faith traditions than his own.

But perhaps the most controversial contribution which Merton made was in the area of social criticism. Here - sometimes unexpectedly to Protestants as the scepticism of Martin Marty over Merton's prognosis for the race situation shows - Merton clearly demonstrates the insight which the contemplative can offer into current affairs. Despite his isolation from many of the media resources which so many of his fellow citizens depend upon for information, from his Gesthemani hermitage Merton was able to discern the pulse of modern America more clearly than most of his contemporaries.

Merton sadly died before his life's work was completed. Where his thought would have taken him we cannot know. What we can guess, however, is that he would have continued to cast light upon the illusions of both individuals and societies to the end that all more nearly embody that unity with one another and with God which is at the heart of the contemplative vision.

## The Life of Thomas Merton

1. Mott, pp. 6, 16
2. Mott, p. 18
3. Cited by Cashen, p. 12
4. John Barber in Wilkes & Glynn [film]
5. Furlong, pp. 60/61
6. Conn, p. 166
7. Conn, p. 165
8. Cashen, p. 13
9. Merton, cited in Conn, p. 170
10. Conn, p. 173
11. Conn, p. 173
12. Merton, cited in Mott, p. 172
13. *Letters*, p. 11
14. *Letters*, p. 11
15. William Shannon: 'Thomas the Person' - address given at *The Merton Conference*, London [May 2 1987]
16. Conn, pp. 183/4
17. Shannon, Conference address [see above]
18. Mott, p. 600
19. Shannon, Conference address [see above]
20. Conn, p. 234
21. Conn, p. 244
22. Shannon, Conference address [see above]
23. Conn, p. 247
24. Mott, p. 305
25. Conjectures, p. 156
    In his biography, Michael Mott [who is a literary scholar] notes the differences between Merton's original journal entry on the Louisville experience and the account to be found in the published journals [*Conjectures*], and points out that the later version is somewhat embellished. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the event was regarded by Merton as of some importance [even if largely in retrospect], and the later version was that which

he presented for publication, and so may be regarded with some justification as more indicative of the impact of the experience on the monk's life.

26. *Conjectures*, p. 157

27. *Conjectures*, p. 158

28. *Conjectures*, p. 158

29. At the time of his appointment as Master of Scholastics - see above.

30. Mott, p. 270 [The reference is to Merton's - as yet unpublished - *New Journal.*]

31. Merton himself writes in the Preface to *New Seeds*: 'This is not merely a new edition of an old book. It is in many ways a completely new book.' He adds, however, that it has become a new book primarily by the addition of new material to the existing work.

32. Cashen, pp. 31/2

33. Cashen, p. 32

34. Carr, p. 98

35. Merton's original article brought a response from Church Historian Martin Marty which criticised him for making such a rash prophecy from the enclosed environment of the monastery. How could he know where America was heading ? Yet four years later, Marty found himself overtaken by events and offered a public apology to Merton, admitting that the Monk had a clearer understanding of American society than himself.

36. Mott, p. 288

37. Carr, p. 124

38. Carr, p. 99

39. Carr, p. 122

40. *Letters*, p. 501

41. *Letters*, p. 511

42. Mott refers to her simply as 'S', Griffin names her as Margie Smith. Whether this was her name we do not know.

43. Dr. Robert Daggy [in personal conversation] has indicated that Griffin's work, in its present uncompleted form as published, is largely made up of paraphrases of Merton's journals. This would appear to justify the assertion that the amount of space Griffin gives to the relationship is indicative of that which Merton himself gave it.

44. See the article by Burton-Christie referred to above.
The following extracts from the poems reveal something of the inner life of the Monk during this unexpected relationship:

It is May we are lost / In unexpected light / We drown in each other / Can you still breathe / Darling in despair / I cling to the round hull / Of your hips and cry / Lend me for God's love / Your lifeboat / Your saving body. [*May Song*]

We with the gentle liturgy / Of shy children have permitted God / To make again His first world / Here on this foolish grass ...

We with the tender liturgy / And tears / Of the newborn / Celebrate the first creation / Of solemn love /
Now for the first time forever / Made by God in these /
four wet eyes and cool lips / And worshipping hands.
[*Louisville Airport*]

If this is at least a day / that is known to you / and now seen by your eyes / though without a sun / its dim light is enough / I am satisfied with it / I look for no other
[*Aubade on a Cloudy Morning*]

In his discussion of the relationship, Fr. Basil Pennington states that:

'I do not think there was ever any question or danger of this romance going beyond the reality of a passing romance that did not exclude a true friendship. Tom felt free and secure enough to open himself to this beautiful experience precisely because he was so solidly grounded in his commitment as a monk. And Marge, on her part, was secure in her relationship with her boyfriend. The romance Tom and Marge allowed to develop between them, with all its joy and pain, would be a growing experience for them both, enabling them to move on in their chosen paths, better persons and better lovers for having had this experience together. I do not mean to imply that there was anything phony about the feelings of love that Tom and Marge had for each other. They were very genuine human feelings and emotions. They allowed themselves to have them to the full, and they were perhaps at times frightened and challenged by them. But they were lived out in the context of other, deeper commitments, which never wavered.' [Pennington, p. 122]
However, I cannot but agree with Pennington when, further on, he concedes that: 'My understanding of Tom and Marge's relationship may seem to be a bit unrealistic' [p. 123]. Although Pennington no doubt brings much Monastic empathy to his study of Merton, it may be that it is precisely this which prevents him from understanding the full implications of what is a very un - Monastic phenomenon: a love affair.

45. Mott, p. 411 [The quote from *Conjectures* is from page 190]

46. Mott, p. 411

47. Mott, p. 437

48. Griffin, p. 83

49. Griffin, p. 86

50. Mott, p. 442

51. See Mott, p. 454

52. Mott, p. 458

53. Mott, p. 454

54. Mott, p. 635 [note 585]

55. Mott, p. 533

56. Mott, p. 454

57. Yet Mott refers to an observation in Merton's journals of 1965 [before the Margie Smith relationship] that many men - including Jacques Maritain and Gandhi - had observed celibacy in marriage. [p. 411]
Furthermore, Griffin observes that Merton compared his love for Margie Smith with the relationship between the Maritains:
'He compared it to the relationship between Raissa and Jacques Maritain and remarked that he had known something of this already in pure friendships with certain nuns with the difference that Margie was "so terribly inflammable and beautiful".' [p. 87]

58. Mott, p. 528

59. Mott, p. 541

60. See Merton's letter to Abbott Burns of September 26:
'My feeling at present is that Alaska is certainly the ideal place for solitude and the hermit life. ... though I am not in a position to decide anything yet, I believe that if nowhere else there is certainly real solitude in Alaska and that it would be very easy (in spite of obvious problems, weather, bears, and all that) to settle here. I think that unless something very definite comes up to change things, this would be the obvious place to settle for real solitude in the United States. [*Alaska*, pp. 48/9]

61. Mott, p 542

62. Quoted by Conn, p. 264

63. Cf. Mott, p.564

64. Carr, pp. 84/5

65. Mott, p. 570 [Mott quotes from *S.S.M.*, pp. 422 - 3 (U.S. ed.)]

66. Cashen, p. 43 [cashen quotes from *S.S.M.*, pp. 411 - 12 (U.S. ed)]

**The Thought of Thomas Merton**

**Introduction**

1. *New Seeds of Contemplation* - Originally published as *Seeds of Contemplation* [1949]; revised edition for seventh printing [December 1949]. New edition published 1962 as *New Seeds of Contemplation* [*Seeds of Contemplation* - U.K.].
2. Contemplative Prayer - Original article written 1964; enlarged into booklet 1965. Between October 1965 and Merton's death this was further enlarged by the inclusion of excerpts from an unpublished ms. entitled 'Prayer as Worship & Experience' [see Shannon, p. 165] to become the present work. Also known as *The Climate of Monastic Prayer.* Published posthumously, but prepared for publication by Merton himself.
3. *C.P.*, p. 9 [The Foreword is by Douglas V Steere].
4. *The New Man* - Completed by the end of 1960. Published 1962.
5. The Monastic Journey - A collection of essays from the last ten years of Merton's life. All but the Appendices had already appeared in various periodicals etc.
6. Contemplation in a World of Action - A collection of essays, some first published between 1966 - 1970, others unpublished. Collected and published posthumously 1973.
7. *The Hidden Ground of Love* - The first volume of Merton's Collected Letters.
8. Faith & Violence - Essays and articles first published in various periodicals. Collection first published July 1968.

**Contemplation**

9. Garvey, pp. 311/2
10. *Alaska*, pp. 112/3
11. *N.S.*, p. 3
12. *N.S.*, p. 100
13. *N.S.*, p. xiv
14. *N.S.*, p. 6
15. Teahan, p. 264
16. Galatians 2: 20 [R.S.V.]
17. *N.S.*, p. 31

18. *N.S.*, p. 32
19. *N.S.*, p. 39
20. *N.S.*, p. 161
21. *N.S.*, p. 280
22. *N.S.*, p. 281
23. *N.S.*, p. 15
24. *H.G.L.*, p. 7 [Letter dated 10.11.41]
25. *N.S.*, p. 35
26. Carr, p. 99
27. *C.P.*, p. 67
28. *N.S.*, p. 47
29. *N.S.*, p. 5
30. *N.S.*, p. 39
31. *H.G.L.*, p. 520 [Letter dated 4.10.65]
32. *H.G.L.*, p. 523 [Letter dated 13.1.66]
33. Introductions East & West, p. 69
[Preface to Japanese edition of *Seeds of Contemplation* (1965)]
34. *Alaska*, pp. 139 - 40 [See also *N.S.*, p 21]
35. *N.S.*, p. 21
36. *N.S.*, p. 51
37. *N.S.*, p. 52
38. *N.S.*, p. 72
39. Merton writes in *C.P.* that: 'To pray "in spirit and in truth" enables us to enter into contact with that infinite love, that inscrutable freedom which is at work behind the complexities and the intricacies of human existence.' [p. 112] The phrase 'hidden ground of Love' comes from Merton's letter of April 13, 1967, to Indian scholar Amiya Chakravarty, where he writes that 'by learning to listen' we can find 'the happiness of being at one with everything in that hidden ground of Love for which there can be no explanations.' [*H.G.L.*, p. 115]
40. *C.P.*, p. 23
41. *Introductions East & West*, p. 69
[Preface to Japanese edition of *Seeds*]
42. *N.S.*, p. 158
43. *N.S.*, p. 1
44. *N.S.*, p. 3
45. cf. *N.S.*, Chapter 39 'The General Dance' (pp. 290-297)
46. *H.G.L.*, pp. 186/7 [Letter dated 16.1.62]

47. *N.S.*, p. 127

48. *N.S.*, p. 128

49. *N.S.*, p. 129

50. *N.S.*, p. 131

51. *N.S.*, p. 134

52. *N.S.*, p. 131

53. *C.P.*, p. 92

54. *N.S.*, p. 187

55. *N.S.*, p. 230

56. *N.S.*, p. 233

57. *N.S.*, pp. 277/8

58. *N.S.*, p. 276

59. Merton at times uses the phrase 'infused contemplation' to emphasise that contemplation is a gift of God.

60. *C.P.*, pp. 91/2

61. *C.P.*, p. 94

62. *C.P.*, p. 94

63. *C.P.*, p. 77

64. *C.P.*, p. 78

65. *C.P.*, p. 83

66. The so-called "Jesus Prayer" comes in various forms, usually utilising all or most of the following: 'Lord Jesus Christ have mercy upon me [a sinner].'

67. *C.P.*, p. 114

68. *C.P.*, p. 115

69. *C.P.*, p. 77

70. *N.S.*, Chapter 4

71. *N.S.*, p. 251

72. *N.S.*, p. 253

73. *N.S.*, p. 65

74. Introductions East & West, p. 69
[Preface to Japanese edition of *Seeds*]

**Theology**

75. *N.V.A.*, p. 258

76. *N.V.A.*, p. 258

77. *N.M.*, p. 30

78. Mennonite scholar John Howard Yoder speaks of "common sense" in this connection: 'Common sense is what everybody thinks - consensus ... The way things are is the way God wants them.' [Yoder pp. 45 ff]

79. *H.G.L.*, p. 143 [Letter dated 10.12.61]

80. *H.G.L.*, p. 143

81. *H.G.L.*, p. 143

82. *H.G.L.*, p. 143

83. *N.M.*, p. 40

84. *N.M.*, p. 44

85. *N.M.*, p. 44

86. *N.M.*, p. 50

87. *N.M.*, p. 54

88. *N.M.*, p. 67

89. *N.M.*, p. 65

90. *N.M.*, p. 70

91. *N.M.*, p. 74

92. *N.M.*, p. 74

93. *N.M.*, p. 107
Merton also refers to the lost union between human beings and God in his Dialog with D.T. Suzuki [see Bibliography]. He writes of the early Desert Fathers, that: 'They sought paradise [here and now] in the recovery of that "unity" which had been shattered by the "knowledge of God and evil".' [p. 82]

94. *N.D.*, p. 82

95. *N.M.*, p. 119

96. *N.M.*, p. 120

97. *N.M.*, p. 120

98. *N.M.*, pp. 128/9

99. *N.M.*, p. 140

100. *N.M.*, p. 173

101. *N.M.*, p. 175

102. *M.J.*, p. 34

103. *M.J.*, p. 36

104. *M.J.*, p. 43

## The Church

105. cf. *N.S.*, p. 142
106. *N.S.*, p. 142
107. *H.G.L.*, p. 501
This is presumably a reference to Merton's friends involved in social action.
108. *H.G.L.*, p. 503
109. *H.G.L.*, p. 505
110. *C.W.A.*, p. 26
111. *M.J.*, p. 67
112. *C.W.A.*, p. 27
113. *M.J.*, p.73
114. *C.W.A.*, pp. 28/29
115. *C.W.A.*, p. 36
116. *C.W.A.*, p. 93
117. *C.W.A.*, p. 100
118. *C.W.A.*, p. 137
119. *C.W.A.*, p. 141
120. *C.W.A.*, p. 208
121. The term and the concept of 'Final Integration' are taken from the work of Iranian psychotherapist Reza Arasteh: *Final Integration in the Adult Personality* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965].
122. *C.W.A.*, p. 226
123. *C.W.A.*, p. 227
124. *C.W.A.*, p. 226
125. *C.W.A.*, p. 228

## Other Religions

126. Cited by Merton in *Mystics & Zen Masters*, p. ix
127. *H.G.L.*, p. 52 [Letter dated 4.4.62 to Abdul Aziz]
128. Essay by Pietro Rossano in Anderson & Stransky [eds], p. 108
129. *H.G.L.*, p. 54 [Letter dated 2.6.63 to A. Aziz]
130. *H.G.L.*, p. 49 [Letter dated 13.5.61]
131. *H.G.L.*, p. 115 [Letter dated 13.4.67]

132. *H.G.L.*, p. 452 [Letter dated 16.8.64 to Ripu Daman Lama]

133. *H.G.L.*, p. 57 [Letter dated 18.10.63 to Abdul Aziz]

134. *H.G.L.*, p. 339 [Letter dated 22.6.65 to Philip Griggs]

135. A further example of Merton's attitude towards other religious traditions is his interest in the Chinese philosopher Chaung Tzu. Merton's Gesthemani colleague John Eudes Bamberger has observed that: 'Chaung Tzu was a mirror image of Merton' [Nouwen, p. 72]. Nouwen goes on to cite Merton's own work, entitled *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, where he quotes with approval the philosopher's statement that 'The purpose of words is to convey ideas. When the ideas are grasped, the words are forgotten.' [Nouwen, p. 79]. It is, therefore, no wonder that the monk could claim that he had enjoyed writing his book on Chuang Tzu 'more than any other' he could remember, for there is clearly a meeting of minds. This is apparent also in another passage from the book, where Merton writes of the 'secret' of Chuang Tzu. The secret 'is ... not the accumulation of virtue and merit ... but ... the non-doing, or non-action, which is not intent upon results and is not concerned with consciously laid plans or deliberately organised endeavors.' [Nouwen, p. 78]

**Social Criticism**

136. *C.W.A.*, p. 169

137. *N.V.A.*, p. 64
This essay, originally published (during the Vietnam war) as the Preface to the Vietnamese edition of *No Man is an Island*, can also be found in the collection *Introductions East & West* [pp. 99 - 106].

138. *F.V.*, p. 35

139. *F.V.*, p. 35

140. *F.V.*, p. 36

141. *N.V.A.*, p. 68

142. *N.V.A.*, p. 75 [The essay is entitled 'Peace & Revolution: A Footnote from *Ulysses*.]
In what may indicate an increasing degree of pessimism concerning the abuse of power, Merton warns in his Alaskan conference paper, 'Community, Politics & Contemplation', of Christian involvement in secular protest movements. He notes: 'when you start dealing with people of this sort you are not dealing with community in any Christian sense, you are dealing with a bunch of operators and they have their reasons, but they are in power politics and this is dangerous.' Furthermore: 'we should understand the principles that are involved and realise that we can't get involved in anything where there is not true Christian fellowship.' For although 'you do have a great deal of good

will in these movements ... [and] a kernel of desire for community, [nevertheless] ... power takes priority.' [*Alaska*, p. 108]. Despite the fact that these remarks were addressed to a religious community [where one might expect to hear such sentiments expressed], it would appear that Merton's reservations of earlier years persisted, and that he continued to be troubled by the nature and tactics of the various protest movements of his time.

143. *N.V.A.*, p. 75

144. *H.G.L.*, p. 298 [Letter dated 16.11.66 to Jim Forest]

145. *H.G.L.*, p. 425 [Letter dated 4.12.65]
Merton included himself in this condemnation - he was not exempt from such a temptation.

146. *H.G.L.*, p. 289 [Letter dated 3.12.65]

147. *H.G.L.*, pp. 291/2

148. *F.V.*, p. 161

149. *F.V.*, p. 162

150. *F.V.*, p. 145

151. *F.V.*, p. 146

152. *F.V.*, p. 147

153. *F.V.*, p. 150

154. *F.V.*, p. 152

155. *F.V.*, p. 154

156. *F.V.*, p. 153

157. *N.V.A.*, p. 159 ['Auschwitz: A Family Camp']

158. *F.V.*, p. 155

159. *F.V.*, p. 159

160. *F.V.*, p. 160

161. *F.V.*, p. 161

162. Gordon Zahn cites Merton here in his introduction to *The Non Violent Alternative*.

163. *H.G.L.*, p. 159 [Letter dated 16.6.62]

164. *M.J.*, p. 64

165. *F.V.*, p. 110

166. The Just War Theory is more accurately termed the **Justifiable** War Theory. Its intention was to provide criteria by which the Church could decide whether Christian involvement in a given war was morally justifiable. The use of the theory today actually reverses the way in which it was intended to be used, for a given war is judged to be 'just' as long as it does not fail any of the criteria for a 'Just War'. In its original usage, Christian

involvement in a given war was considered to be unjustified unless it could meet the criteria given by the theory.

167. *H.G.L.*, p. 458 [Letter dated 6.9.67 to Martin E. Marty]

168. *F.V.*, p. 6

169. *F.V.*, p. 6

170. *F.V.*, p. 9

171. *H.G.L.*, p. 458 [Letter dated 6.9.67 to Martin E. Marty]

172. *N.V.A.*, p. 165

173. *N.V.A.*, p. 167

174. *N.V.A.*, p. 75

175. *H.G.L.*, p. 294 [Letter dated 21.2.66]

176. In a letter to Daniel J. Berrigan, dated 10.10.67, Merton discusses the status of property, and expresses doubts as to how far damage to property can be considered as consistent with nonviolence: 'Ethically and evangelically we are getting toward the place where we have to be able to define our limits. I don't say violence against property is off-limits. It certainly seems to me that killing people is. But if it comes to burning buildings, then people are going to be in danger and whoever is involved is going to be partly responsible for people getting destroyed even on his own side in a way that the non-violent resister would not be responsible. (They - fuzz - have no right to kill a non-violent person but they certainly think they have a right to kill a violent one.)' [*H.G.L.*, p. 97]

177. *N.V.A.*, p. 35

178. *N.V.A.*, p. 258 [Pax Medal Acceptance Speech: 1963]

# 5

## *Conclusions*

At the conclusion of this study, a number of issues which were discussed in the Introduction now re-emerge following consideration of the life and thought of two influential Christians of our time. What is spirituality, and what is its relation to theology and ethics ? What is the significance of context to spirituality ? And finally, what is the relevance of recent discussion of theology's "New Paradigm" to this study ? Were Bonhoeffer and Merton exemplars before their time of a new way of doing theology ? And if so, what is their relevance for our own time ?

Our first concern is to summarise something of the preceding discussion. Therefore, by way of summary and comparison, the thought of our two subjects will be considered according to the four general themes: God, Christ, Creation, Transformation; and then three themes more specific to them: Reality, Maturity, Vision. This will then lead into a more general discussion where our study will conclude.

# Summary

## 1. God

> The Christian contemplative ... is called mainly to penetrate the wordless darkness and apophatic light of an experience beyond concepts, and here he gradually becomes familiar with a God who is "absent" and as it *were* "non - existent", to all human experience. [1]

> ... all these things are so *difficult* and so remote *that we* hardly *venture* any more to speak of them ... [2]

Here, in their own words, are Merton and Bonhoeffer speaking of their conceptions of God.

Not surprisingly, given his Contemplative vocation, Merton stands very firmly within the apophatic tradition of Christian spirituality. [3] Even before his conversion to Catholicism, Merton was convinced of the inadequacy of all our words about God. The process of dis-illusionment, with which he was concerned throughout his life, applied to God too. However, to approach God by the negative way, whilst acknowledging the inadequacy of our words and concepts, nevertheless opens up a whole new vision of the divine reality. Indeed, such is a work of God, who by his grace enables us to penetrate to the 'experience beyond concepts' which is the apophatic vision. For the apophatic way rejects all forms of dualism, and so in Merton's words:

> You have to take God and creatures all together and see God and His creation and creation in God and don't ever separate them. Then everything manifests God instead of hiding God or being in the way of God as an obstacle. [4]

In the end, the apophatic way is about

> the inner unity of all ... the presence of God in the midst of uncertainty and nothingness, as the only reality. [5]

Coming from the Lutheran Protestant tradition, Dietrich Bonhoeffer does not stand within the same contemplative stream as Merton. Yet there is an intriguing convergence between the later Bonhoeffer and the contemplative tradition. In his later writings [6], Bonhoeffer evidences a growing hesitancy about the knowability of God, culminating in his work in the *Ethics* on 'The "Ethical" and the "Christian" as a Theme' [7], and in references in the *Letters & Papers* to the inadequacy of our present God-language [8], to the love of God as *cantus firmus* [9], and to the necessity of living *etsi deus non daretur* [10]. There are a number of reasons for believing this convergence to be significant. Firstly, the fact that Bonhoeffer is rooted in the theology of Martin Luther, himself a product of the Catholic mystical tradition. Secondly, the fact that Bonhoeffer draws chiefly on the early Luther, whose mystical tendencies are particularly clear. Thirdly, the fact that the later Bonhoeffer, despite his suspicion of mysticism, in reality faces the same question as the mystics, namely that of identity - "Who am I ?"[11] A fourth reason concerns the context out of which this convergence arose. For, both on a personal and a social-political level, Bonhoeffer's last years were marked by a profound sense of the breaking down of established life patterns, and so to a degree his whole life during those years can be seen and understood as an

apophatic experience. [12] In the end, his constantly expressed concern that there be no separation of God from the world, and his growing awareness that words and concepts of God were becoming totally inadequate, mark Bonhoeffer as one who had entered upon the apophatic way.

Both Bonhoeffer and Merton stand together in the negative way. For them both, theological tradition and contemporary reality came together in their vision of God, as they sought to relate the divine reality to the situations of crisis which they faced. For both, in true apophatic fashion, sought to affirm the presence of God in the darkness **precisely because** it was the darkness.

## 2. Christ

The figure of Jesus Christ is, of course, of importance for both. However, they differ in the particular significance that they each give to him, and so it is of interest here to compare their different approaches.

The thought of Thomas Merton is somewhat ambivalent about the place and significance of Jesus Christ. In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton writes that the 'normal' way into contemplation is through Jesus Christ. [13] Here the concept of incarnation is crucial, for in this man Jesus, God and humanity meet. And because of their meeting, contemplative union is made possible. Furthermore,

because of the incarnation, Christ is present in Creation, the Church, and the monastic community, indeed, no created thing can of itself be an obstacle to union with him. Yet, the focus is not on the life of the historical Jesus so much as the Christ who is sacramentally present now. Furthermore, since the final goal of the contemplative is union with God, the human life of Jesus is

> not, strictly speaking, the ultimate resting place of contemplation ... [14]

For Merton, therefore, Christ has an important place, but one which nevertheless gives ultimate importance to God. It is through Christ that God is to be met in the world. Furthermore, it is through Christ that one enters the way to union with God, and it is Christ who lives in us as we seek to follow his way:

> To have a truly spiritual life is to think and love and act not just as Christ would act in a given situation, but as He precisely does act, by His grace, in us ... [15] [Merton's emphasis]

Yet in the end, it is union with God which is the goal, and Christ becomes - inevitably - a means to an end.

The God-man Jesus Christ stands at the centre both of the theology and the spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Throughout his writings, Bonhoeffer takes with the utmost seriousness the Reformation principle that "the finite is capable of bearing the infinite" [*finitum capax infiniti*]; therefore, where God is, God is totally. [16] Thus, through Christ, God is totally present to the whole world.

The centrality of Christ is the key to Bonhoeffer's entire life and theological development. In the *Christology*, the young theologian writes that

> The one who is present in word, sacrament and church is in the centre of human existence, of history, and of nature. [17]

Later, in *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer claims that the Christian

> belongs to Christ alone, and his relation with the world is mediated through Him. [18]

And of the *Ethics*, James Burtness writes:

> For Bonhoeffer all of God and all of the world come together in Jesus Christ. There is no such thing as God without world, and there is no such thing as world without God. What Jesus Christ means is that these two have come totally together. [19]

Throughout Bonhoeffer's work there is a constant awareness that Christ is met in the neighbour. More specifically, there is a way too in which Christ takes form in his Church. Both these conceptions of the presence and reality of Christ arise out of the theology of Lutheranism, yet for Bonhoeffer they also arise out of the reality of the incarnation, through which

> in Jesus Christ God and man become one. [20]

Thus the will of God is obeyed as we serve our neighbour, and as we do so there is a very real sense in which

> the form of Jesus Christ takes form in our world. [21]

In the end, there is a distinction to be drawn between Merton on the one hand, and Bonhoeffer on the other, with regard to their respective approaches to Jesus Christ.

For Merton, Christ is essentially one who points us to God. Christ is the one who - by his mediation - opens the way for mystical union with God. Ultimate importance, therefore, belongs to God, and it is recognised that there are other figures, besides Jesus, who also point us to God. Thus, Merton entered into dialogue with fellow monks from other religious traditions, recognising that they too shared his contemplative quest, yet came via a different route. This represents what traditionally has been termed a Christology **from below**.

By contrast, Bonhoeffer's approach to Jesus Christ is rooted in a view of the incarnation exemplifying what is traditionally termed a Christology **from above**. Thus, the fact that God and humanity have become one in Jesus Christ means that God and his world are decisively united, and that there is therefore no way to God but through the mediation of Jesus Christ. For God is wholly present in Jesus Christ. And so, even the tentative explorations of 'unconscious Christianity' are firmly rooted in the incarnation.

### 3. Creation

Both Bonhoeffer and Merton share in common a refusal to see creation as in itself evil, and a barrier to communion with God.

Merton is the closest to monism. For him the contemplative vision of unity - of oneness with all that is - ultimately means oneness even with God. And so, there is even now, no absolute distinction between God and the world. Indeed, creation is effectively a sacrament, and as such its importance as a revelation of God is radically affirmed.

Therefore, no created thing can - in itself - be an obstacle to communion with God. At the root of sin lies not matter but illusion. For sin arises not out of creation itself, but out of the illusion that all is not one - that the individual is self-sufficient, with no need of God or other people. Such, for Merton, was the faulty basis of all human society.

In the end, all is one in the "hidden ground of love", and this is the truth which for Merton is at the centre of his entire life and thought. This is the truth which motivates his social concern, his dialogue with other religions. The ultimate reality is not separation, but unity.

Bonhoeffer seeks to affirm both truths. He is concerned to affirm that there is a distinction between God and the world. But, like Merton, he is also concerned to identify God and the world, for

> God and the world are ... at one in Christ. [22]

Yet, to claim that God and the world are forever identified because of the incarnation of Jesus Christ is not to say that they are rendered indistinguishable. There is a danger here of what Burtness terms 'Christo-monism' [23], but Bonhoeffer avoids this by his clear affirmation that God and the world remain two distinct - though inseperable - entities.

For Bonhoeffer, therefore, unity is only possible because of Jesus Christ. He alone is the source of unity. Because of the incarnation, God and the world are rendered inseperable. Because of the incarnation, all creation is a manifestation of God. Hence Bonhoeffer can truly claim to follow Christ into the worldly concerns of the conspiracy against Hitler.

### 4. Transformation

Both subjects of this study have in common a concern for the transformation of the human community. Faced with crisis, both personal and social, each saw acutely the need for personal and social transformation. As an example of this concern, this section

will focus particularly on the place of nonviolence in the thought of Bonhoeffer and Merton.

In his context, Dietrich Bonhoeffer stands squarely within the tradition of the Lutheran Reformation, focused as it is, primarily on the individual's relationship with God. And so, it is the Biblical imperative of nonviolence, as it is expressed in the life and teachings of Jesus, which first leaves its mark on the young theologian. And it is in his study of the Sermon on the Mount in *The Cost of Discipleship* that we find Bonhoeffer's chief discussion of the importance of nonviolence. To be a follower of Christ is to follow him in his nonviolence too, and so a commitment to nonviolence is part and parcel of one's commitment to obedience. However, this would not remain the chief concern of the later conspirator. For Bonhoeffer was to move away from this strong emphasis on nonviolence to a position where he saw his own involvement in the planned violent overthrow of Hitler as an unavoidable imperative. This represents a move away from a view of transformation rooted first in the personal (What is the right thing for me to do ?) although having a very clear social significance too (a concern for peace was an important response to events of the 1930s), to a view of transformation rooted first in the social where questions of responsibility (How are the coming generation to live ?) and community come to the fore. Therefore, in line with his proposed reinterpretation of Biblical concepts, Bonhoeffer's understanding of transformation also shifted from the personal to the social. [24]

The initial reason for Merton's entry into Gesthemani was - unsurprisingly - that of personal transformation. Such was the primary reason for the monastic vocation. Yet there was a sense in which such a vocation was seen as having a very real and positive transforming effect on society too. However, it was not until the latter part of the 1950s that - by his own admission - Merton came to a real understanding of this. A personal vocation to nonviolence was part and parcel of his monastic calling, and so it was some time before Merton came to a specific concern for issues of violence, war and peace. For this reason too, his views on violence in general have to be seen in the context of his own personal vocation to nonviolence. Why was the monk to be nonviolent ? For Merton it was a sign of the new reality of which the monastic community stands as representative: Nonviolence is at the heart of our true identity as human beings created in the Image of God. To be truly human is to be nonviolent, and the social implications of this assertion can be seen in Merton's increasing concern for peace and justice during the 1960s.

Throughout Merton's thought, transformation is both personal and social. He continued to seek his own personal trasnformation throughout his life. Furthermore, an awareness of the significance of the monastic vocation for social transformation was with him from the outset, but it took some time for it to be understood in terms of positive action, rather than in passive terms as an almost inevitable result of the existence of the monastic community. And so, we see in Merton's life too an increasing

awareness of the importance of both personal and social transformation.

It is clear that both Bonhoeffer and Merton experienced a growing realisation that transformation was a social as well as a personal concept. This is exemplified in their respective approaches to the question of nonviolence. For Bonhoeffer, transformation is initially a matter of individual obedience to Christ, but faced with the realities of Nazism the focus then shifts from the individual to society, to ask about responsibility. For Merton, transformation is both personal and social. Throughout his life he asks questions concerning illusion, identity and reality, but it is only during his last years that he sees the full social implications of his vocation. Hence his growing advocacy of nonviolence.

**5. Reality**

Both Bonhoeffer and Merton can be characterised as passionately engaged in a quest for reality.

From his childhood imaginings of death, through his early works of theology, to his final involvement with the conspiracy against Hitler, Bonhoeffer evidences a deep concern for reality. This concern is exemplified in the questions which engage his life's work: "Who isJesus Christ for us Today ?" he asks in the

*Christology*; "What Do We Really Believe ?" he asks in the *Letters & Papers From Prison*. [25]

Yet Bonhoeffer was only too well aware that, in the end, reality was bound up with the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. As he wrote in the *Ethics*:

> The reality of God discloses itself only by setting me entirely in the reality of the world, and when I encounter the reality of the world it is always already sustained, accepted and reconciled in the reality of God. ... I never experience the reality of God without the reality of the world or the reality of the world without the reality of God. [26]

For

> It is from the real man, whose name is Jesus Christ, that all factual reality derives its ultimate foundation ... To attempt to understand reality without the real man ... is to fail to make contact with reality in life ... [27]

From the outset, Merton too was deeply concerned with reality. His relief at discovering Gilson's book, with its assertion that God was more than our human words for God; his quest for the meaning of personal identity, and particularly his own; his understanding of his monastic vocation as unmasking the world's illusions about itself. All express his passionate concern to encounter reality: the reality of God, self, world.

This concern is evidenced throughout Merton's life and work. One example is his 'Events & Pseudo Events: Letter to a Southern Churchman', where he writes that:

> A contemplative will ... concern himself with the same problems as other people, but he will try and get to the spiritual and metaphysical roots of these problems - not by analysis but by simplicity.

Part of that simplicity is living apart from newspapers and T.V. Of this aspect of his monastic situation he writes:

> My own experience has been that renunciation of this self-hypnosis, of this participation in the unquiet universal trance, is no sacrifice of reality at all. To "fall behind" in this sense is to get out of the big cloud of dust that everybody is kicking up, to breathe and to see a little more clearly. [28]

Although they each express it in their own distinctive style, and in their own specific context, both Bonhoeffer and Merton in their life and thought can be said to engage in a passionate quest for reality.

## 6. Maturity

Both Bonhoeffer and Merton share a vision of human and Christian maturity.

Faced with the growing power of the Nazi regime, and the collapse of the traditional moral and social structures of German society, Bonhoeffer became increasingly preoccupied with the question of maturity. He himself became increasingly isolated from his fellow Christians, and more and more dependent upon his own resources. And so his vision came to encompass a humanity "come of age", yet focused on a Christian living a responsible life, eschewing reliance

upon anything but common sense mediated through pure faith in Christ. Such is to be Christian - and human.

Merton, too, shares a vision of personal and corporate maturity. But for him the language is that of identity and the unmasking of illusion. For to be mature is to have found one's true identity - whether as a person or as a society. The frustration over his abortive relationship with Margie Smith led Merton to a renewed interest in the question of maturity, and especially the concept of "Final Integration" [29], with all its implications for persons and communities. The question of a monasticism without vows continued to occupy him. Indeed, during his last talk, just hours before his death, he announced that from now on, everyone

> stands on his own two feet. [30]

For both men, to be Christian is not to be dependent on human concepts or structures - but on God alone. To be Christian is to be fully human: "come of age", mature, one's true self. The task of the Church, therefore, is to foster true humanity in the persons and structures of the world. But, as both found out to their cost, the Church is not always aware that this is indeed its task.

## 7. Vision

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Thomas Merton can with justification be termed prophets. Both recognised what we would now refer to as the *Kairos* for their own time and place, and acted upon that recognition. Their spiritual vision was inseperable from their sense of time and place. Both sought to understand their times, and their own part in them, and to address the specific issues of their situation. Finally, both sought to identify themselves with humanity beyond the particularities of their own place. For Bonhoeffer, this led to the claim in *Letters and Papers From Prison* that:

> We have learnt to see the great events of world history from below...from the perspective of those who suffer. [31]

For Merton, this led to his identification with those Christians active outside the Monastery as his '"real" community' [32], and to his increasing commitment to fellow Monks of other religious traditions, demonstrated by his final journey to the east.

In addition, both Bonhoeffer and Merton leave us tantalising glimpses of the implications of their thought for the structures of the Church. Bonhoeffer leaves us with the vision of a Church for others. Merton leaves us with the vision of a monasticism without vows. Of their legacy, Walter Capps writes in his book *The Monastic Impulse*:

> One can assign Merton and Bonhoeffer similar functions in the process of cultural transition. Twenty-five years before

> Merton's death, Bonhoeffer proclaimed a "humankind come of age". Merton was on to something similar, it seemed, though the stakes could no longer be restricted to European civilisation, but focused on the rapprochement between Eastern and western cultures. Furthermore, it is intriguing that Merton, like Bonhoeffer in his *Letters and Papers From Prison*, was in touch with considerations whose greater manifestation occurred after his death. In specific ways, both had been able to sketch the configuration of a portion of the future before the future had broken through. [33]

In relation to the basic Christian themes of God, Christ, Creation, and Transformation, and to the more specific themes of Reality, Maturity, and Vision, the preceding discussion indicates much common ground between the subjects of this study. With this summary material in mind, we now pass on to a consideration of what has been described as theology's "new paradigm", and ask whether this offers any contribution to our understanding not only of Bonhoeffer and Merton, but also to the overriding interest of this study - namely the question "What is Spirituality ?"

## A New Paradigm ?

A number of recent writings have pointed to the emergence in recent years of a new movement in Christian faith and practice, identified by some scholars as a "new paradigm". [34] Of the emerging concerns which he sees as portending 'the recasting of much of Christian faith', Larry Rasmussen writes that though

> "consensus" is premature, and not quite the word ... shared dynamics and converging themes are visible. [35]

Three works will be considered here as we investigate various themes suggested as characteristic of the "new paradigm". Firstly, an article by Larry Rasmussen entitled 'New Dynamics in Theology'. Secondly, a book by Rebecca Chopp entitled *The Praxis of Suffering*. Thirdly, an essay by Rosemary Ruether entitled 'Christian Quest for Redemptive Community'. At the end of each section of this synthesis of various themes of the emerging paradigm we shall return to the the subjects of our study, and ask where they fit into the picture under discussion.

### 1. Larry Rasmussen

What are the 'common themes' which, according to Rasmussen, presently

> break the surface of theological reflection

and present a challenge to Christian faith and practice ? [36]

Firstly, there is a decisive movement away from a theology of universal application and validity toward a variety of theologies, each rooted in their respective contexts. Rasmussen notes that 'emergent theologies' arise out of

> shared group experience ... [where] theology is done as a communal process from a self-consciously defined and particular perspective. [37]

Therefore, emerging theologies are rooted in the experience and identity of those who are doing the theologising.

Secondly, there is a shift in the focus of theology. The 'material reality' addressed in much emergent theological reflection is what Rasmussen terms

> massive, public suffering.

This shift of emphasis from the private to the public, characteristic of the new paradigm, leads therefore to a concern for

> the social systems that shape our lives ... as well as to public events themselves ...

And so, for such theologies

> the suffering and hidden God comes more and more to the fore. [38]

Thirdly, there is a shift in the 'function of religion' from offering meaning to those unable to change reality, to sharing in the human task of transforming reality. Theology's work is now seen to be transformation instead of consolation. So many of

the important issues of our time are moral issues that it is hardly surprising that we increasingly

> test the potency of faith claims by the difference they make for human well-being and the well-being of the wider creation.

Thus, Rasmussen notes of the new paradigm, what he refers to as

> the ethical qualification and intensification of all Christian symbols. [39]

Fourthly, there is a new approach to Jesus. A renewed interest in the historical Jesus has led to a 'major shift'

> from a Christocentric theology to a theocentric Christology.

This, as Rasmussen explains,

> is to say: God, not Jesus, is the power at the centre of things, and a God-centred life is precisely what we see in Jesus. [40]

Furthermore, a renewed interest in the historical Jesus has led to the discovery of a

> radically theocentric and socially radical Jesus [41]

providing a spur both to those engaged in interreligious dialogue and to theologies of liberation.

Fifthly, Rasmussen notes a 'theological preoccupation' with power. The reality of increasing power for some at the expense of increasing powerlessness for others is a very vital preoccupation

for theology - which seeks to speak of the divine empowerment of all. Faced with such reality, the question as to

> How God's power is imaged in relation to human power is a matter of much present exploration. [42]

These five themes, Rasmussen sees expressed in two very different, but complementary, movements within the Church. On the one hand, there is the religion of the poor and marginalised, where an acute sense of need meets a faith 'full of feeling and energy'. Here, at the grassroots is an

> empowering religion with a common home among subjugated and disempowered social groups. [43]

On the other hand, there is, in the very different context of the academy, what Rasmussen refers to as

> the conceptual and ritual revisioning of inherited traditions in times of deep, often bewildering, change. [44]

However, these movements are converging. And Rasmussen identifies two 'streams of reflection' for special comment. One is liberation theology, whether it be of class, race, or gender. This would seem to be an example of the first movement. The other is European political theology:

> the voice of the bourgeoisie questioning its own religious and cultural assumptions and its own economic and political systems. [45]

This would seem to exemplify the second movement. Yet both also stand to illustrate Rasmussen's assertion that the grassroots and the academy are converging, as expressed in the five themes.

These five themes, which Rasmussen sees as common to theological reflection in our day, can be seen already in our discussion of the life and work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Thomas Merton.

The importance of **context** emerges from consideration of each of our subjects. We cannot understand either of them apart from their theological, social and political context, and furthermore, they are conscious of that fact. Yet this has not always been so. As Douglas John Hall writes:

> There is a tendency in the works of our precursors ... to discuss the Christian faith without any intensive attention to the particularities under which the discussion is taking place ... It is even typical of them that they (politely?) avoid sharing with their readers the specifics of their own existence ... [even] sense of place. [46]

An acknowledgment of context brings with it an acknowledgment of the **reality** in face of which one does theology. Rasmussen points to the existence in our time of massive public suffering. In their own way both of our subjects respond to this legacy of suffering. And both take the apophatic way - focusing on the hidden God, sharing our suffering in Jesus Christ.

Faced with reality, both are committed not only to understanding it, but to changing it. The shift from a primary concern for orthodoxy to **orthopraxis** is characteristic of our time. It is also a significant stage in the development of Bonhoeffer and Merton, who both reached theological maturity in a milieu where orthodoxy remained very much the prevailing ideal. Furthermore, the reinterpretation of God-talk in terms of social reality was a task which Bonhoeffer set himself throughout his life, most notably in his final writings, and in which Merton too, became engaged as he took the contemplative way and opened up its relevance for society as a whole.

The place of **Jesus Christ** in the thought of our subjects again exemplifies Rasmussen's two approaches. Bonhoeffer's is clearly a 'Christocentric theology' - Christ is central to his whole life and thought. God and the world are both seen through the mediation of Jesus Christ. Merton, by contrast, exemplifies what Rasmussen calls a 'theocentric Christology', whereby Christ is seen preeminently as one who points us to God. Yet even Bonhoeffer, whilst affirming that all of God is met in Jesus Christ, does not understand this assertion in an exclusive sense but rather in the most inclusive terms. Thus the presence of Christ permeates the world, even to the extent that Bonhoeffer can speak of what he terms 'unconscious Christians'.

Finally, the question of **power** finds expression in the life and thought of both of our subjects, in their refusal to come to an absolute position over the use of violence. It is in face of the

reality of the violence which exists even in the very structures of society, prior to any response, that the question of violence becomes less clear cut. This was certainly the experience of Bonhoeffer, faced with the evils of Nazism. It is also the source of the ambiguities to be found in Merton. Thus neither is prepared absolutely, and for all circumstances, to reject the use of violence.

Rasmussen's article helps us to focus on a number of themes which are characteristic of the new paradigm, and to ask whether they are characteristic of our subjects. As we have seen, both can be seen as exemplifying, to a significant degree, the methodology and concerns of the new paradigm. Thus both can be said to have been pioneering representatives of a new way of doing theology.

## 2. Rebecca Chopp

One of the works referred to by Larry Rasmussen in his article is Rebecca Chopp's study of liberation and political theologies. Chopp is concerned with two streams of theological reflection which have largely arisen since the late 1960s, and so it is again of interest to this study to note the extent to which our subjects exemplify the characteristics of these subsequent theological trends.

Both streams seek, in their language and witness, to embody the unity of 'faith and world', for no longer can the two be considered as 'separate realms'. [47] Liberation theology, in particular, unites creation and redemption [and thus also faith and world]

> in the promise of historical fulfilment. [48]

Yet liberationists such as Bonino are concerned to avoid the extremes of monism or dualism. And so it is necessary to see all history - both the kingdom and concrete human history - as interrelated, but distinct. Within such a view of history, the Church is seen as a sacrament of God's action in history. The action of God, embodied in the Church, is fundamentally a thrust towards liberation -

> God acting in history through human activity for the coming kingdom. [49]

Here is, in Chopp's words,

> a new interpretation of the Christian faith, combining spirituality and politics ... [50]

Comparing the work of liberationist Gustavo Gutierrez with such works as Augustine's *Confessions*, Chopp writes of the latter as

> a theological journey on the historical path of faith ...

And of both, she writes that they

> [use] theology to understand faith travelling on its journey to God ...

Indeed,

> Theology, for both ... is part of the process of a journey to God ... which is, at the same time, a process of history ... [51]

Both Bonhoeffer and Merton are concerned with the relation of God and the world. Each seeks to move away from the dualism of much of Christianity's past, yet both fall short of affirming the opposite extreme of monism. Their concern is that God and the world not be seen in opposition to one another, but rather as inectricably bound up together. This concern, as witness liberation theology, and more recently creation-centred spirituality [52], is high on the agenda of Christian thought in our own time.

In particular, Chopp notes that the concept of 'liberation' unites creation and redemption

> in the promise of historical fulfilment. [53]

Each of our subjects lived out such a unity. Bonhoeffer saw it as his Christian responsibility to become involved in the historical process even at the expense of his more narrowly defined "Churchly" duties. Merton too, although his chosen vocation potentially united creation and redemption, took the contemplative way into unexplored arenas of social and political transformation.

Once creation and redemption are seen as integrally one movement towards the fulfilment of all that is, the political and

the spiritual become inseperable. All is the stuff of life, and so all is the stuff of faith. And so, faith does not lead to a rejection of the world, but rather calls one to an involvement in the world. This is what is so distinctive about our two subjects, and also the reason why the concept of "spirituality" is of particular interest in relation to them. For, as Chopp indicates by her comparison of Augustine and Gutierrez, the latter's concern

> is not the "unpacking" of theological method but the weaving together of lived experience.

Thus Gutierrez'

> main concern is to provide a language for [a] new experience of history and Christianity. [54]

Chopp suggests that the common genre of Augustine's *Confessions* and the work of Gutierrez is that of systematic theology. I should like to suggest that their common genre is rather that of spirituality, and furthermore, that the concept of spirituality speaks precisely of that 'weaving together of lived experience', both of God and of the world, which Chopp discerns in the work of Gustavo Gutierrez. Indeed, it is the assertion of this study that such an integration of total life experience is to be found in the work of Bonhoeffer and Merton.

The "new paradigm" is about integration - and so is the concept of spirituality. In the life and thought of each of our subjects we see an integration of the history of the world and the history of faith into one reality.

### 3. Rosemary Radford Ruether

Rosemary Ruether, in an article entitled 'Christian Quest for Redemptive Community', analyses a number of 'historical models' of the Church. [55] Of most interest to this study are Ruether's introductory comments concerning personal preferences, and her discussion of the type which she terms liberation Christianity. For this model is close to the position at which both our subjects ended their lives.

Ruether wants to distinguish between models of the Church which are 'ethically flawed', and therefore

> contradict the root concept of the church as redemptive community

and those which do not at present speak to one's spiritual quest. [56] For Ruether herself, whilst she regards certain models of Church as flawed, she does not reject such models outright, because whilst they don't address her own present spiritual quest, they do however address that of others. Her attitude to what she calls 'mystical, monastic types of Christianity', for example, is that they

> spoke to me at one time in my life, but don't speak to my present spiritual quest. [57]

The article then proceeds to analyse various models of Church, focusing particularly on that of liberation Christianity. The marks of liberation Christianity are largely those of the new paradigm which has been discussed above. Yet unlike other models of

Church, liberation Christianity does not entail the formation of new institutions but rather, within the existing churches,

> seek[s] to transform more of the church into a liberationist understanding of the gospel.

For,

> Sharing a common religious language, but not a common interpretation of that language, liberation Christians see themselves as called to witness to and convert these other Christians. [58]

Therefore, Ruether discerns what is effectively a cross-denominational ecumenism, such that

> Each of these types of Christian may be more comfortable with their counterparts in other denominations than with critics within their own church. [59]

The value of Ruether's article for our study is her treatment of pluralism as it is found within the institutional Church. For it is noteworthy that both Bonhoeffer and Merton originate in a very distinctive - and different - Christian tradition, yet by their life's end had moved significantly beyond that and, in many respects, may be seen to have converged upon certain common themes and concerns. Indeed, whilst theologically each remained rooted in their respective traditions, there is another sense in which each had moved far beyond many of their contemporary co-religionists. Again, the concept of spirituality enters the picture here, for the common themes and concerns are more than the stuff of theology, they are the stuff of life - and hence of spirituality.

Again, therefore, I should like to suggest that it is at the level of spirituality that the common ground of the "new paradigm" is largely to be found, and certainly as it is embodied in the lives of the subjects of this study.

The preceding discussion of three perspectives on the so-called "new paradigm" has discovered a significant amount of common ground shared with the subjects of this study. Here are two people whose lives and work embody much that theology in our time is finding anew. This is of interest in itself. Yet the concern of this study is also at a more general level, and it is at that level, with the question with which we began - What is spirituality ? - that we conclude.

# The Context of Spirituality

> **context** *n* - 1 the parts surrounding a written or spoken word or passage that can throw light on its meaning. 2 the interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs[60]

The theme of this study is 'The Context of Spirituality', and this theme has been investigated with reference to the life and work of two twentieth century Christians - Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Thomas Merton. As well as informing our understanding of these two persons, this study has also reached a number of general conclusions, which are embodied in the preceding sections of this chapter. These conclusions are summarised below:

Firstly, that both the subjects of this study are self avowedly - and in a way not previously acknowledged by Church or academy - only fully understandable in relation to their context. We need to know about them, the personal and social realities of their lives, to fully understand their work.

Secondly, that the thought of both subjects converges in significant ways, yet without the loss of their theological roots. Therefore, that such convergence is at a deeper level than that of doctrinal theology, at the level of *Theoria* rather than *Theologia*.

Thirdly, that many of the themes articulated by our two subjects are for our own time part of what is variously termed theology's "new paradigm" or "liberation Christianity". There is a shared awareness

that there is a new movement in theology today, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Thomas Merton can be claimed as amongst its forerunners.

Fourthly, that central to the new way of doing theology in our time is the principle of integration. What once was separate has now been brought together. Thus creation and redemption, secular and sacred, world and church, even non-christian and Christian, are brought together into unity. A concern for integration is central to the life and work of each of our subjects.

Fifthly, that because of the bringing together of secular and sacred, world and Church, all of life is now the stuff of spirituality. For this reason, it is suggested that the common ground between Bonhoeffer and Merton can best be captured by reference to their shared spirituality, and furthermore, that such a shared spirituality is unsurprising given that both to some extent shared a common history, for each lived at a time of social and political crisis.

The Dictionary defines 'context' in a twofold way. It refers to the surroundings of something through which light is shed on the meaning of the thing itself. It also refers to the conditions out of which something arises or within which it occurs or exists.

In the course of our study of the life and work of Bonhoeffer and Merton we have considered the personal, theological and

social - political context of two spiritualities. Our study of the context has not contributed only to an understanding of the spirituality of the person, but also to our understanding of spirituality in general. For there is a sense in which it can be suggested that spirituality is its context - that this study can best answer the question 'What is spirituality ?' by pointing to the lives of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Thomas Merton. The life situation of a person is the crucible within which a spirituality is formed - it provides the raw material out of which a spirituality arises and in which it exists. But it is also - as it is experienced, internalised, and responded to by the person - the stuff of spirituality itself.

Therefore, a study of the **context** of spirituality can help us to understand the **content** and **meaning** of spirituality. In the end, spirituality is about the stuff of life as it is experienced, internalised, and responded to by a spiritual person - ie. one who has received the grace to see within that stuff the creator God. Where the subjects of this study most importantly converge is in their common awareness of the immanence of God. One of the definitions of spirituality, cited in the **Introduction**, focuses on this as it speaks of spirituality as

> a response to ... God experienced as immanence. [61]

This sense of the immanence of God, found as it is in the life and work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Thomas Merton, was present too in the medieval mystic Mister Eckhart. Here too

spirituality finds its definition in all of life, hence no doubt one reason for the recent popularity of Eckhart's work. And David Toolan's comment about Eckhart, at the end of his account of a personal journey of faith through the New Age movement, offers both an appropriate epitaph for the two persons on whose life and work we have focused in this study, and a suitable point at which to conclude this study itself. For Toolan writes of Eckhart as 'incorrigibly Catholic', one who [like Bonhoeffer and Merton]

> moves toward God through this messy world. [62]

1. Merton, *C.W.A.*, p. 186

2. Bonhoeffer, *L.P.P.*, pp. 299/300

3. Of the Apophatic tradition, Clifton Wolters writes: 'There are two ways of describing our knowledge of God, and in [the west] they have long been called the Positive Way (*via positiva*) and the Negative Way (*via negativa*). Eastern Christians recognise the distinction but call the two ways more precisely and accurately cataphatic and apophatic, and prefer the latter to the former. The Western Church tends to reverse this judgment.
*Via positiva* proceeds by way of affirmation and describes God in terms of human attributes, raising them, of course, to an infinite power. ... Though inexpressibly beyond all human understanding of these terms, there is still a connexion between the human significance and the divine, and the difference is quantitative rather than qualitative. ...
*Via negativa* starts from the unkowability of God ... God is "wholly other", and qualitatively different from his creatures. ... Any description however exalted is inevitably a human one, and because of this difference in kind can never be accurate or adequate [since] we use words which can only be properly understood in a human context ... He cannot be understood by man's intellect. ... When the mind faces [God] ... it becomes blank before a knowledge it can never assimilate ... it enters a cloud of unknowing.
[The apophatic way] is negative in name only ... At no time [does it claim] that God is unkowable, save to the power of the intellect ... God can be known only by love, and by love the soul enters into union with him.' [Clifton Wolters: Introduction to *The Cloud of Unknowing* (London: Penguin Books, 1978 / pp. 16-17]

4. *T.M. in Alaska*, pp. 139-49

5. Moore, p. 2 [Quoting Merton]

6. Most especially *Ethics*, *F.F.P.*, *L.P.P.*

7. *Ethics*, pp. 263 - 302 [Macmillan edition]

8. *See, for example, L.P.P., p. 300*

9. *L.P.P.*, pp. 303 ff.

10. *L.P.P.*, p. 360

11. These points arose from personal conversation with Dr. Ferdinand Schlingenseipen. In this connection, Karlfried Froelich notes in his introduction to *The Complete Works of Pseudo-Dionysius* [Paulist Press: 1987] that the early Luther 'praises Dionysius' negative theology as ... the "most perfect" theology in contrast to the imperfect babbling of scholastic affirmative theology as wine compared to milk' [see *Psalms*: 1513-16]. However, he

continues, Luther was later to decisively reject Dionysius' theology, presenting as an alternative his own negative theology in the form of the *theologia crucis.* Even his early enthusiasm must be qualified, for Froelich notes that 'even Luther's early utterances imply a critical distance.' [p. 43] See also Rowan Williams' study *The Wound Of Knowledge* [Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979], where he writes of St. John of the Cross as 'the least triumphalist, the most unconfident of the saints of that age ... [having] been into the same desert, the same hell as Martin Luther.' [p. 159]. He concludes [in words apprpriate to Merton and Bonhoeffer too], with the assertion that Luther and John 'are, among the great writers of the Christian past, the most poignantly aware of the ways in which spirituality can be an escape from Christ. For both of them ... the test of honesty is whether a man or woman has looked into the darness in which Christianity has its roots, the darkness of God being killed by His creatures, of God Himself breaking and reshaping all religious language by manifesting His activity in vulnerability, failure and contradiction.' [p. 177].

12. Hence his frequent references in the *L.P.P.* to the inadequacy of language in a religious context.

13. New Seeds, p. 151
['The normal way to Contemplation is a belief in Christ that is born of thoughful consideration of His life and His teaching.']

14. *Monastic Journey*, p. 144

15. *Monastic Journey*, p. 43

16. See Chapter 2 [above]

17. *Christology*, p. 60

18. *Cost of Discipleship*, p. 207

19. Burtness article, p. 253

20. *Ethics*, p. 191

21. *Ethics*, p. 68

22. *Ethics*, pp. 195, 207 [Macmillan edition]

23. Burtness, p. 253

24. See Bonhoeffer's 'Outline for a Book' [*L.P.P.*, esp. pp. 381/2]

25. See the *Christlogy*, where the central question asked of Christ is "Who ?" and *L.P.P.*, p. 382

26. *Ethics*, p. 195 [Macmillan edition]

27. *Ethics*, p. 228 [Macmillan edition]

28. *Faith & Violence*, pp. 147, 151

29. *Contemplation in a World of Action*, pp. 219 ff

30. See Mott, p. 564

31. *L.P.P.*, p. 17

32. *H.G.L.*, p. 501
33. Capps, p. 46
34. A number of works referred to here relate to this theme.
35. Rasmussen, p. 178
36. Rasmussen, p. 179
37. Rasmussen, p. 179
38. Rasmussen, p. 179
39. Rasmussen, p. 180
40. Rasmussen, p. 183
41. Rasmussen, p. 182
42. Rasmussen, p. 182
43. Rasmussen, p. 178
44. Rasmussen, p. 178
45. Rasmussen, p. 180
46. Hall, p. 362
47. Chopp, p. 19
48. Chopp, p. 24
49. Chopp, p. 25
50. Chopp, p. 27
51. Chopp, p. 63
52. See the resounding rejection of all forms of dualism by Matthew Fox in *Original Blessing* and other works.
53. Chopp, p. 24
54. Chopp, p. 62
55. Ruether, p. 3
56. Ruether, p. 3
57. Ruether, p. 3
58. Ruether, p. 10
59. Ruether, p. 9
60. Penguin English Dictionary [1985]
61. Joan Timmerman [Word & World, Winter 1988]
62. Toolan, p. 316

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# Appendix
## Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*

The book that we know as Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* is essentially a collection of working drafts for a work which, sadly, was never to be completed. There has been much scholarly discussion as to the order in which the surviving manuscripts should be arranged, with differing orders in the various published editions. For the sixth German edition, attention is being shifted from the order in which Bonhoeffer would have intedned us to read his completed work to a consideration of the order of composition of the various mss. The following outline is adapted from the Abstract of a paper given at the 1988 Conference of the International Bonhoeffer Society for Archive & Research in Amsterdam, by Ilse and Hans Eduard Tödt. It reflects the state of research as at that time.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER'S *ETHICS*
*Suggested Order of Composition*
*1940 - 1943*

1. *Before Commencing Work On the Ethics*:
   STATE AND CHURCH

2. First Working Period [March 18 - November 13 1940]:
   CHRIST, REALITY AND THE GOOD
   ETHICS AS FORMATION (Part 1)
   ETHICS AS FORMATION (Part 2)
   INHERITANCE AND DECAY (Part 1)
   INHERITANCE AND DECAY (Part 2)
   GUILT, JUSTIFICATION AND RENEWAL

3. Second Working Period [November 17 1940 - February 22 1941]:
   LAST THINGS AND THINGS BEFORE THE LAST — November 17 - December 10
   THE NATURAL LIFE — December 10 - February 22

4. Third Working Period [March 25 - October 25 1941]:
   HISTORY AND GOOD (First Draft - See *G.S.*)
   HISTORY AND GOOD (Second Draft)

5. Fourth Working Period [End 1941 - Autumn 1942]:
   PERSONAL AND REAL ETHOS
   LOVE OF GOD AND DECAY OF THE WORLD
   CHURCH AND WORLD
   ON THE POSSIBILITY OF THE WORD OF THE CHURCH TO THE WORLD
   *PRIMUS USUS LEGIS*

6. Fifth Working Period [End 1942 - April 5 1943]

AFTER TEN YEARS

ETHICAL AND CHRISTIAN AS A THEME

CONCRETE COMMANDMENT AND DIVINE MANDATES

7. After Breaking Off Work on the *Ethics*:

WHAT IS MEANT BY TELLING THE TRUTH ?